

The Parable of the Two Sons

Matthew 21:23-52

Matthew 21:23-32 - *“Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?”*

24 But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: 25 The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”

And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26 But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.” 27 So they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.” And He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

28 “But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’ 29 He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said to Him, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.”

Background Notes

The Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem was on Sunday (Matthew 21:1-11). The cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the Temple were on Monday (Matthew 21:12-22). So this confrontation between our Lord and the religious leaders of the Jewish people most likely took place on the Tuesday before the crucifixion. As was the common practice for teachers of the Law, our Lord taught the people who were gathered in the Temple courts. The chief priests and elders came and interrupted His teaching, asking, *“By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?”*

They were referring to our Lord’s cleansing of the Temple the day before, as well as His healing miracles in the Temple courts that followed the cleansing of the Temple. These events had caused a great commotion in Jerusalem, and the self-righteous leaders didn’t like Jesus of Nazareth’s popularity. *“Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’” Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. **But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did... they were indignant...**”* (Matthew 21:12-15, emphasis added).

So the chief priests and elders asked Jesus, *“By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?”* They were hoping to trap the Lord, no matter what answer He gave! If He claimed His own authority, they would accuse Him of blasphemy. If He claimed God’s authority, they would challenge Him, because they considered themselves to have God’s authority. If the Lord claimed authority from men, then these leaders would deny that claim and discredit the Lord because He had no formal religious training. He had no credentials to teach, since He hadn’t studied Judaism under a leading Rabbi. Well, the Lord didn’t fall into their trap!

Doctrinal Points

1. Dealing with skeptics is essential to standing firm.

The Lord saw through the scheme of the skeptical leaders. He asked them a question: *“I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John - where was it from? From heaven or from men?”* In answer to their question, the Lord asked the religious leaders where John the Baptist had gotten his authority for carrying out his ministry. John the Baptist had not been trained by any of the leading rabbis of the day, and he certainly didn’t have any academic degrees after his name! So was his authority human or divine?

Now the chief priest and the elders were in a dilemma. *“And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ John the Baptist had proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, so if John’s authority was from God, why didn’t they believe his message, and accept Jesus as the Messiah? ‘But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.”*

When critics are confronted with the obvious truth, they have to say, “We don’t know!” That’s typical of skeptics, both then and today. So the Lord responded, *“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”* (I love the way that the Lord dealt with the skeptics of His time, don’t you?)

We have to deal with the skeptics of our time, and we should follow our Lord’s example. It’s essential to stand firm in the faith. *“Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age,¹ against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”* (Ephesians 6:11-13).

Standing firm against the schemes of the devil involves refuting the false claims of skeptics. The Lord didn’t run away from the skeptics, and He didn’t zap them with fire from heaven. He stood firm and refuted them, and we should do the same.

There are plenty of skeptics today, and if you're actively serving the Lord, you will have to deal with skeptics. Recently an email came into our website from a skeptic in the Netherlands. He denounced me for making authoritative statements about the Bible and the Christian faith. He then proceeded to set himself up as an authority, and say that **no one** should make authoritative statements or claims about religion and moral standards! I wrote back and pointed out to him that every sentence of his email was an authoritative statement. Therefore, based on his own argument, his statements carried no weight! (I loved it!)

That's the way you have to deal with skeptics. You have to beat them at their own game. Usually it's easy to do, because their arguments are inconsistent, because any departure from the biblical worldview will be inconsistent. In fact, any other worldview has flaws and holes that can be, and should be, pointed out and refuted.

In 1 Peter 3 we are commanded to defend the Christian faith when we're speaking with skeptics. We should have answers for anyone who questions us about our faith. *"...always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear..." (1 Peter 3:15).*

The Greek word that's translated here as "answer" or "defense," is the word from which we get the term "apologetics." Apologetics is a defense of the Christian faith. We are to be involved in apologetics. **We are to have answers!** The message of 1 Peter 3:15 is not an option. It is a **command!** Do you have your answers ready? Dealing with skeptics is essential to standing firm.

2. Doing God's will is evidence of saving faith.

"But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him." (v28-32).

The self-righteous religious leaders condemned themselves with their response to this little parable. When the Lord asked them which of the two sons did the father's will, they correctly answered that it was the son who actually obeyed the father, and not the son who just gave lip service to obeying the father. In the same way, the tax gatherers, like Zacchaeus, and the harlots (like possibly Mary Magdalene), at first did not live their lives in obedience to God's laws. But then they repented, did God's will, came to the Lord and were saved. The religious leaders in Israel gave lip service to God's laws, but they wouldn't believe the message of John the Baptist. They wouldn't repent and come to the Lord. They wouldn't do God's will, and therefore they weren't saved.

Doing God's will is evidence of saving faith. A lot of people **say** they have faith, and give lip service to the teaching of God's Word, but their lives are evidence that **it is only a profession** of faith. This is what James meant when he wrote, *"For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also"* (James 2:26). James didn't mean that works are necessary for salvation, or that "faith + works = salvation." No, he meant that the **kind of faith that saves is the kind that results in obedience** after salvation. If it's just lip service and a profession of faith, that kind of faith will not save you. I trust that you are not just giving lip service to the Lord, because doing God's will is evidence of saving faith.

Practical Application

Always look for the "third alternative."

The Jewish leaders challenged Jesus, asking Him, *"By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"* (v23). They expected Jesus to answer either "divine authority" or "human authority." The Lord took a "third alternative" in His reply. Rather than answering them, He asked them a question!

The Lord often used a third alternative when confronted with questions about His teachings. In Matthew 22, the Pharisees tried to trap the Lord with a question about taxes: *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* Our Lord didn't answer "yes" or "no." He chose a third alternative.

"Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. ¹⁷ Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way" (Matthew 22:15-22).

The perfect answer!

Sometimes the Lord chose the third alternative - not answering His critics' questions at all! That's always our option, too. So we should follow our Lord's example. Many times a third alternative is the best way to answer those who question our Christian faith, and the Lord will help us to find the right third alternative. Always look for the third alternative!