

The “Way of Righteousness” is the Way of Faith

18th Sun. after Pent. – 10/01/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 21:23-32 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 23, **“The chief priests and the elders of the people came up to [Jesus] as He was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?’”**

v. 28, [Jesus responds,] **“What do you think?”**

Introduction

✘ Many of us here today, hear about these Jewish religious leaders; the chief priest and the elders, and the way that they so blatantly challenge Jesus’ authority to be there, in His Father’s house, teaching the people the truth about God and the way to eternal salvation, and we just have to shake our heads in bewilderment.

➔ I mean, these Jews are supposed to be God’s people; the ones who have had God’s Word with all of the prophecies and promises from God so that they would know Jesus is the Son of God when He came. And yet, just as John 1:10-11 says, so we see it in this text today, “[Jesus] was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him.”

✘ Even though these Jews despised the Greek ways, they still lived in a Greek world. And so, by Jesus’ time the philosophies of Socrates had more than 400 years to soak into every corner of their society. It was Socrates who first encouraged the people to question any and all authority, including even his own. He famously said, “All I know is that I know nothing” and he was accused of blasphemous behavior when he encouraged people to think for themselves, which only encouraged what we see here in the Jewish leaders who were thinking only about themselves; thinking that they were the only authority when it came to matters of God and His truth.

I. A Deadly Challenge to Authority

✘ But what these Jews do not realize is how deadly their challenge to Jesus really is. For when they challenge Jesus’ authority, they are challenging God Himself. Jesus taught in John 14:9, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.” And also in John 10:30, “I and the Father are one.”

➔ But Jesus of course knows their sinful motives, and He has no intention of letting them believe that they have any authority or right to question His divine authority, so what does He do? He turns the tables on them and issues His own challenge, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell Me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” (vv. 24-25).

➔ This too is a question of authority, John the Baptizer’s authority to baptize not only all of the people that came to him in the wilderness to be baptized, but far more important, Jesus wants them to consider the source of John’s authority to baptize Jesus Himself!

➔ It was there remember, that John even questioned his own authority to baptize Jesus, saying in Matthew, chapter three, “‘I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’ But Jesus answered Him, ‘Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness’” (3:14-15). We’ll come back to that important statement in a little bit.

➔ But as to the question of the source of John’s authority, it was there, at Jesus’ baptism that Matthew 3:16-17 says, “the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God

descending like a dove and coming to rest on [Jesus]; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'."

- ✘ Undoubtedly, the Jewish leaders had at least heard accounts of this event. So, they reasoned that if they were to say that John's baptism came from heaven, then they would convict themselves of rejecting the very God whom they proclaimed and confessed. That's a deadly proposition to be sure.
 - ➔ But on the other hand if they say that John's baptism is only concocted by men, then the hundreds, maybe even thousands of people who believed that John was a true prophet from God would surely rebel against them – a deadly proposition as well.
 - ➔ So what did they do? They chickened out and went for a third option – the one that has been a favorite of us wimpy human beings ever since our fall into sin – the noncommittal option of riding the fence. The "we don't know" (v.27) option, supposing it will get them off the hook.

II. The Trap of the Two Children

- ✘ But in reality, as riding the fence usually does, it only opened the door for these unbelievers to lay their own trap; to tie their own noose. With a masterful turn that only Jesus could bring about, it seemed to them that Jesus lightened up the mood by moving on to one of His famous stories, when in reality He narrowed the focus of the conversation even more tightly upon these Jewish leaders who are too proud to admit their own need of repentance.
- ✘ Jesus tells the parable of the Two Children whose father approaches them and says, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today" (v.28). The first initially says, "No" but then later says, "Yes" while the second initially says, "Yes" but later says, "No".
 - ➔ And Jesus asks His opponents, "What do you think?" (v.28). "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (v.31). Even if the Jews were thinking Jesus was trying to catch them with this question, I imagine they figured this one was a no-brainer. Of course "the first" (v. 31) child did the father's will because he actually went out to work in the vineyard.
- ✘ Yet their answer only served to prove Jesus' point that these so-called church leaders were not really as equipped to lead God's people as they believed themselves to be. Because in reality, neither one of the two children is entirely correct nor obedient to his father is he?
 - ➔ It's easy of course to see how the second son, the "yes then no" boy goes against his father's authority and sins, but just as it was for the Jewish leaders, so many of us right here in God's Church today tend to be too quick to gloss over the seriousness of the first son's "no then yes" sin against his father.
 - ➔ You see, despite his later change of heart and eventual obedience, it is no small offense to reject God's authority, even if it's only saying the words or thinking to oneself, "I will not" as the first boy did in verse 29.
- ✘ Wendell Langley, in his article on this passage says, "Jesus presents a situation in which each son is partly obedient, partly disobedient and neither is totally obedient ... How much more so a son who is disobedient on both accounts" (*The Parable of the Two Sons against Its Semitic and Rabbinic Backdrop*, 1996).
 - ➔ And that's where Jesus now lets the shoe drop on these chief priests and elders before Him in our text today. Rather than being either "no then yes" or "yes then no" leaders for God's people, these guys show that they are an entire group of "no-no" leaders!
- ✘ You see, no matter their reply, they have nowhere to go! What they should do is repent and believe the message that John the Baptizer has been so urgently trying to get them to hear and then go out into the vineyard of the Father's Church and teach it themselves. Even more, they

should repent of their rejection and refusal to acknowledge that Jesus is as the Father's voice at His baptism and John later proclaimed Him to be, the promised Son of God; the very "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29).

III. The "Way of Righteousness" (then)

✘ But sadly, because they continue to reject both John and Jesus as well as their parts in God's salvation plan, Jesus convicts them of their utter condemnation and shame by telling them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you" (v.31).

→ Now understand, according to the Jews, those who collected taxes for the Roman authorities were automatically condemned to hell right along with prostitutes and any others they considered to be gross sinners. And yet, Jesus now tells them to their face that these "sinners" who were led to repent of their sins by believing in the message about Jesus that John the Baptizer was teaching; that they, through the Holy Spirit's work in their hearts, would now be going into the kingdom of God before them, maybe even instead of them – the Jewish religious leaders!

✘ How could Jesus ever say such a thing? Well, remember, how Jesus told John that he must baptize Jesus "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:14-15)? Now Jesus tells these clueless leaders in verse 32, "John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him."

→ This "way of righteousness" is God's perfect, right and only way to salvation for every heart, mind and soul to receive forgiveness from sin and enter into eternal life before God's throne in heaven.

→ This is not any man's imagined or wishful way to heaven, where we think that it is "right" just because we're the ones who think it is right. No, this is the one and only "way of righteousness" that the one and only God of Creation has proclaimed in His perfect authority.

✘ His is the only authority that matters when it comes to salvation. And it is His authoritative word proclaimed first by John the Baptizer and then both proclaimed and visible in Jesus as the Word made flesh that they have arrogantly refused to believe!

→ As Jesus said at the end of verse 32, "...even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him."

IV. "The Way of Righteousness" (today)

✘ Whew! I'm sure glad I'm not anything like those guys, right? Well, before either you or I hang ourselves with a noose that we ourselves have tied, let's consider how this text and teaching from Jesus might speak to us here and now first.

→ There are at least two obvious applications for us that I see.

✘ First, by Jesus' own interpretation of His parable, the important contrast He intends for us to see is between those who "believe" both His and John's message and those who "do not believe".

→ And the group of people in our world that best corresponds to those in the text would be the religious leaders of God's Church today; that is the pastors and theologians and other leaders of the Christian Church.

→ John's message was that there was a serious need for deep and broad repentance within the established Church of God, especially among those whom everyone assumes should obviously

be saved. And who is that? Well, the pastors; the experts in God's Word; the Sunday School teachers and Church workers; and those who grew up as life-long believers.

→ But just as it was with the Jews, so it can be today. Those who have been in worship every Sunday; those who work in the Church, can get lazy and lax in their faith so that the precious and saving Word of God – in both Law and Gospel is no longer cutting deep into our hearts to convict us of our sin and make us alive in Christ's saving work each and every day as it should. This is precisely when Satan loves to plant the kernel of pride and laziness among us so that our faith in Christ might grow into a faith in our own righteous way instead.

⊗ The second application of Jesus' teaching today is that we learn from Jesus' work of saving grace in the tax collectors and the prostitutes who believed in Him.

→ Whatever your past or your current situation may be, my dear people, if you hear nothing else today, hear this well – not from me, but from Jesus, there is always, always the chance to repent and believe in Him and be saved!

→ Our God; our loving Father delights in drawing all sinful souls to Himself – if only they will humble themselves under His authority and grace. Jesus, whose authority must never be questioned, longs to exercise His supreme authority over our every sin and weakness; over our fear and despair. Why? So that He can forgive and restore us by His bloody death and His glorious resurrection alone!

⊗ Anyone may come; everyone who is burdened and heavy laden is invited, so that by believing in Jesus and Jesus alone, they will find eternal rest in His "way of righteousness"! Amen.