

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/01/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, October 1st

Matthew 21:23-32

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What do you think?

Having entered Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, and begun to teach from there, not surprisingly Jesus comes into direct conflict with the central Jewish authorities. At the root of the Gospel lection this week is the matter of authority. On whose authority is Jesus doing all this. In this week's text, Jesus sidesteps a direct challenge from a group of Jewish officials and turns the tables upon them. Their own responses reveal their choice of expediency over truth and putting their own status and traditions over the will of God. Parallel behaviors can be found among the institutional church today where traditionalism reigns, where the church is run for the benefit of the members at the expense of the community, when the Gospel is conformed to society, or when Christ is used to achieve worldly political agendas. Authentic Christianity is always radical.

Matthew 21:23-32 Commentary

Jesus has mocked the Jewish leaders and positioned Himself in the temple. Direct confrontation is now inevitable. Jesus' authority is first challenged (21:23). Jesus responds to the chief priests and the elders (21:24-27) and then tells three polemic parables clearly directed against the Jewish authorities (21:28-32; 21:33-46; and 22:1-14). This is only the first of five challenges undermining Jesus' authority (22:15-22; 22:23-33; 22:34-40; 22:41-46).

²³ And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

After spending the night in Bethany (21:17), Jesus returns to Jerusalem the next day and enters the temple. The chief priests and the elders together with the scribes made up the Sanhedrin which was responsible for both religious and civic matters. Clearly, this is a confrontation with the highest level of religious leadership. The question about authority related to "these things" probably refers to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, His cleansing of the temple, His healings (21:1-16) and now teaching in the temple.

²⁴ Jesus answered them, "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. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it 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 man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Jesus' response is a masterful use of the rabbinic technique of counter-question. He replies with a question of His own about the authority of John the Baptist that undermines His challengers. If the delegation from the Sanhedrin had admitted John the Baptist was from heaven, Jesus would ask them why they had not submitted to John's baptism. If they had denied that John was a prophet to justify not submitting to his baptism, they would have risked provoking the crowds who they fear (v.26). They were at a loss. Their only option was to feign ignorance. We can imagine how embarrassed the delegation must have been and how quietly they responded, "*We do not know.*" The delegation was in this position in the first place because they had intentionally put their own status and tradition over truth.

²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go.

Jesus presses further with the Parable of the Two Sons. The parable compares two sons. One refused to do what the father asked but then changed his mind and complied. The other said he would do what the father asked but did not.

³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For 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.

Jesus' question of which of the two sons did the will of the father forces the delegation to step outside of their silence and pronounce judgment on themselves. By recognizing the first son as doing the will of the father, the delegation of chief priests and scribes must have recognized the first son in the parable represents those who they condemned. These sinners who failed to do the will of the father eventually complied. In this parable the chief priests and the scribes must have recognized themselves as the second son – those who openly professed to do the will of the Father yet failed to recognize His Son when He stood in front of them.

Reflections & Application

In the West we live under systems of government that have essentially separated religious authority from civic authority and thus lack the perspective of the power that the Sanhedrin had over both religious and civic matters. Perhaps the recent COVID-19 pandemic response may have given us a small glimpse of such as we have seen examples of civic governments dictating whether worship is essential, what constitutes worship, and when churches can open.

The Sanhedrin professed to represent the interests of the people but worked to secure their own interests. Like all ruling elites who exploit the majority, they feared the crowds (21:26). In this case, an uprising by the crowds would have upset their cozy relationship with the Roman authorities and threatened their worldly status. In the lectionary text, Jesus exposes this lie and drives the point even further with the Parable of the Two Sons.

This text challenges us to ask uncomfortable questions in our time: "What lies might the church in American be living today?" To what extent is the church willing to accept expediency over truth? Where has tradition become traditionalism? How are the first sons in the parable treated today? Just as Christ's ministry disturbed the human-distorted traditions and power structures of God's people, authentic Christianity disturbs the status quo that opposes the Kingdom in every generation. As the history of great awakenings demonstrates, often the strongest resistance is within the established church.