

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost
“The right answer that God graciously gives”
(Matthew 21:23-24)
October 1, 2023
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for this 18th Sunday after Pentecost is from our Gospel reading, Matthew 21:23-24.

“23 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:

So far the text...

What “things” were the chief priests and elders talking about? Well...cleaning out His Father’s house that had become a den of thieves, healing the blind and the lame and teaching...

This was Tuesday of Holy week, the last day of Jesus public teaching and healing before His crucifixion on Good Friday at the end of the week. Jesus had just rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday to the praises of the people -minus, of course, the chief priests and elders. They were actually plotting the opposite, as we know from John 11:53, - plotting to put Him to death.

They witnessed the things which were praised even by littlest ones and it angered them!

“15 But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant 16 and said to Him, “Do You hear what these are saying?”

Oh, the chief priests knew the answer to the very question they posed, “by whose authority” Jesus was doing these wonderful things, but they refused to believe in Him.

They refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David, true God and true Man.

They needed to repent. They needed to despair of their sins and believe in Jesus with trusting simple faith like the children. So, out of love, Jesus refuses to answer their question unless they answer His first.

“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.

The answer to Jesus question, whether John’s baptism was from heaven, is the same answer to the chief priests question of “by whose authority” did Jesus do these things. The authority is from heaven – from God. John the Baptist and Jesus’ teaching were one and the same – a calling to contrition and faith in Jesus!

Matthew 3:11

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

John prepared the way for Jesus, “He who is mightier than I”– pointed the people to Jesus – baptized people for the remission of sins in Jesus. As we know from:

Mark 1:4

“John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”

To acknowledge that John's ministry came from heaven was to acknowledge that Jesus was from heaven also. And the chief priests knew this. But refused to answer. For they only thought about themselves. Acknowledge John the Baptist was to acknowledge Jesus. To reject John the Baptist's ministry as sent from heaven, was to incur the wrath of the people and they feared this greatly.

So they gave a non-answer – “we don't know”. They lied. For they did know. It's like the person who is being interrogated by the prosecutor in a court of law. Rather than answer the question truthfully, we often hear people say, “I don't recall. I don't remember.”

A mom and dad ask their child who broke the vase and child gives a “I don't know” shoulder shrug.

Maybe you've seen those funny pet videos where the dog is left alone in the house and leaves a big mess, chewing up things and breaking things. When the owner comes home and yells, “Who did this?” the dog instinctively puts on a sheepish face, cowers and walks away with it's tail between it's legs. And there are a few laughs because everyone knows who did it.

Well, the chief priests refusal to believe in Jesus was no laughing matter. So, out of love, Jesus once again tries to make the chief priests recall God's Word, repent and receive forgiveness. He tells them another story. He tells it to us as well, for He doesn't want a shoulder shrug. He wants us to do His will – acknowledge our sins daily and believe in Jesus for our forgiveness.

Jesus tells the story of the two sons. One speaks from his lips and the other from his heart. One says, “I'll go and work in your vineyard, but doesn't” and the other initially says “no”, but later relents and goes.

God, of course, is the Father and the vineyard is His Kingdom of grace. Both sons are equally sinful. But, only one enters the kingdom of God through repentance. As Article 12 of the Augsburg Confession says:

“Now, repentance consists properly of these 3 two parts: One is contrition, that is, 4 terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of 5 the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that for Christ's sake,

sins are forgiven, comforts 6 the conscience, and delivers it from terrors. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance.”

And again, the apology of the Augsburg Confession says calls repentance conversion.

“...we have ascribed to repentance [or conversion] these two parts, namely, contrition and faith.”

God works both contrition and faith so that a person declares by the power of the Holy Spirit “Jesus is Lord”.

1 Corinthians 12:3

Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

God alone can supply the right answer to who Jesus is.

So, the chief priests rightly answered correctly that the second son did the will of the father by going into the vineyard. Yet, they themselves refused God the Father’s will and would not believe in Jesus. To which Jesus says 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.”

For Jesus alone is way of righteousness. His righteousness covers our sins in our baptism. His righteousness is given to us in the Lord’s Supper as we eat and drink His body and blood for our forgiveness. The worst of sinners, you and I included, enter God’s Kingdom, by the power of the Holy Spirit when He works contrition in our hearts by the law and faith in Jesus our Savior. That’s repentance!

What did the tax collectors and harlots do? They showed their fruits of repentance by declaring God’s righteousness. So, we hear from Luke 7:29.

“29 And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. 30 But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.”

Another surprise ending. Last week the we heard the story of the laborers in the vineyard each receive a denarius. The ones who worked only one hour received the same as those who had worked all day. Because it's by grace that we enter into God's Kingdom and receive eternal life.

Those who complain and murmur against God that they worked harder and longer, make it about themselves and reject His grace. They are the last, the ones who remain outside of God's Kingdom, while the repentant tax collectors and harlots go before them.

Thanks be to God that He gives each of you the right answer to the question, “By whose authority does Jesus do these wonderful works”. In faith, you answer by “God's authority”, from heaven above, who has graciously shown me these wonderful works of salvation in Jesus' death and resurrection. And with the children in the temple we praise God saying, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.Amen.

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)