



Sunday School Lesson
Matt. 21:28-32
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A Story of Two Sons



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With this Bible study, we continue to look at the parables of Jesus as recounted to us from the first gospel. Once more we are looking at a story that Jesus told, which is only found in Matthew's gospel. The setting has changed again, so the contextual background will play an important role in understanding this parable. Since we are dealing with parables, the extra steps in interpretation that parables necessitate will also be employed here.

I. Context

The issues relating to the composition of the Gospel of Matthew remain the same as from the preceding lessons on Matthew, and thus, these conclusions will be assumed for this study. For the detailed exploration of these, see the lesson on "The Parable of the Tares taken from [Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43](#).

a. Historical

With this gospel being written to persecuted Jewish Christians in the early 70s of the first Christian century, the parable of the two sons took on particular application to the initial readers. The initial Jewish rejection of Jesus by the religious authorities was being repeated by Jewish people all over Palestine in the midst of the national disaster of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In desperation to preserve their national identity after having lost any semblance of independence as a nation, they were turning inward and rigidly back to the ancient traditions of legalistic obedience to the current interpretation of the Old Testament scriptures given them by the scribes. This inward move carried with it a strong demand for all Jews to "get their act together" religiously and join this movement. Jewish Christians would be viewed as among those "not doing the Father's will" and thus be called upon to repent and "obey the Law of God" as the scribes interpreted it.

The **internal history** aspect of the parable can be gleaned rather clearly from the larger context of Matthew chapter twenty-one. The final week of Christ's physical life on planet earth begins with this chapter; this is displayed in detail in my outline of the [Life of Christ: Pericope Listing](#) at Cranfordville.com.

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
V. Final Week and Crucifixion				
	21:1-27:66 (34%)	11:1-15:47 (34%)	19:29-23:56 (20%)	11:55-19:42 (33%)
A. Friday, arrival at Bethany	-	-	-	11:55-12:1
B. Saturday, prophetic anointing	26:6-13	14:3-9	-	12:2-11
C. Sunday, Messianic Manifestation	21:1-11	11:1-11	19:29-44	12:12-19

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
D. Monday, Messianic Authority 21:12-19	11:12-18	19:45-48	12:20-50
E. Tuesday, Controversy and Teaching 21:20-26:16	11:19-14:11	20:1-22:6	-
F. Wednesday, rest (no record)			
G. Thursday, farewells 26:17-46	14:12-42	22:7-46	13:1-18:1
H. Friday, Redemptive Accomplishment 26:47-27:61	14:43-15:47	22:47-23:56	18:2-19:42
I. Saturday, Guard posted at the Tomb 27:62-66	-	-	-

As is clear from the outline, this parable is part of the events that happened on Tuesday of the Passion Week. This day was filled with confrontation with Jewish leaders, incensed over the cleansing of the temple by Jesus earlier. The events of Sunday through Tuesday are narrated differently by the different gospel writers as is reflected below ([Life of Christ: Passion Week](#)):

Matthew:	Mark:	Luke	John
126. Triumphal entry into Jerusalem 21:1-11	61. Triumphal entry into Jerusalem 11:1-11	120. Triumphal entry into Jerusalem 19:28-44	54. Triumphal entry into Jerusalem 12:12-19
127. Cleansing the temple 21:12-17	62. Cursing the fig tree 11:12-14	121. Cleansing the temple 19:45-46	55. Request of some Greeks 12:20-26
128. Cursing the fig tree 21:18-22	63. Cleansing the temple 11:15-18	122. Daily teaching in the temple 19:47-48	56. Jesus' commitment to the passion 12:27-36a
129. Objections raised by Sanhedrin 21:23	64. Lessons from the fig tree 11:19-25	123. Objections raised by Sanhedrin 20:1-2	57. Rejection of Jesus in unbelief 12:36b-43
130. Dilemma of John's authority 21:24-27	65. Objections raised by Sanhedrin 11:27-28	124. Dilemma of John's authority 20:3-8	58. Unbelief judged 12:44-50
131. Parable of the two sons 21:28-32	66. Dilemma of John's authority 11:29-33		
132. Parable of the wicked tenants 21:33-46	67. Parable of the wicked tenants 12:1-12	125. Parable of the wicked tenants 20:9-18	
133. Parable of the great supper 22:1-14	68. Paying taxes to Caesar 12:13-17	126. Paying taxes to Caesar 20:19-26	
134. Paying taxes to Caesar 22:15-22	69. Question about the resurrection 12:18-27	127. Question about the resurrection 20:27-40	
135. Question about the resurrection 22:23-33	70. The greatest commandment 12:28-34		
136. The greatest commandment 22:34-40	71. David's son 12:35-37	128. David's son 20:41-44	
137. David's son 22:41-46	72. Denouncing the scribes 12:38-40	129. Denouncing the scribes 20:45-47	
138. Denouncing the scribes and Pharisees 23:1-36	73. The widow's offering 12:41-44	130. The widow's offering 21:1-4	
139. Lament over Jerusalem 23:37-39	74. Temple destruction predicted 13:1-2	131. Temple destruction predicted 21:5-6	
140. Temple destruction predicted 24:1-2	75. Signs of the times 13:3-27	132. Signs of the times 21:7-28	
141. Signs of the Times 24:3-31	76. Lesson of the fig tree 13:28-31	133. Lesson of the fig tree 21:29-33	
142. Lesson of the fig tree 24:32-35	77. The unknown day and hour 13:32-37	134. Be ready 21:34-36	
143. The unknown day and hour 24:36-44			
144. Parable of the unfaithful servant 24:45-51			
145. Parable of the ten virgins 25:1-12			

146. Parable of the talents
25:13-30
147. Judgment of the sheep
and goats 25:31-46
148. Prediction of death
26:1-2

135. Teaching ministry in
the temple 21:37-38

149. Plot of the Sanhedrin
26:3-5
150. Anointing at Bethany
26:6-13
151. Betrayal agreement
26:14-16

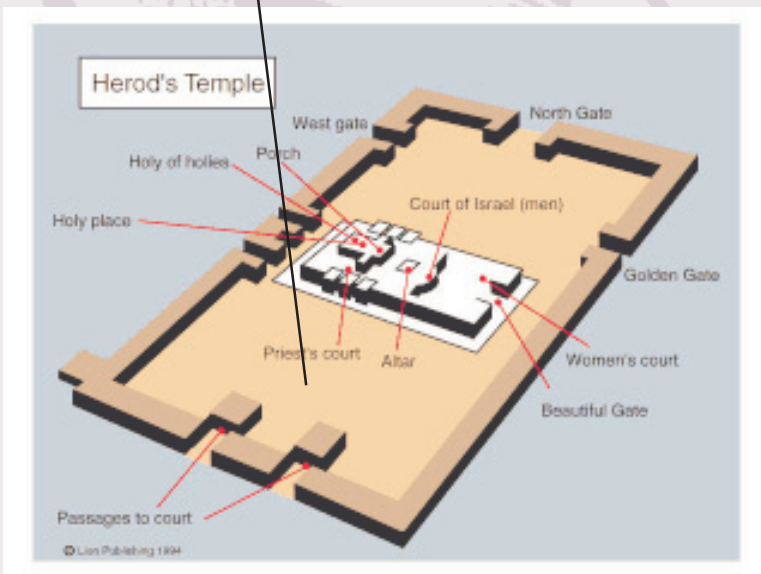
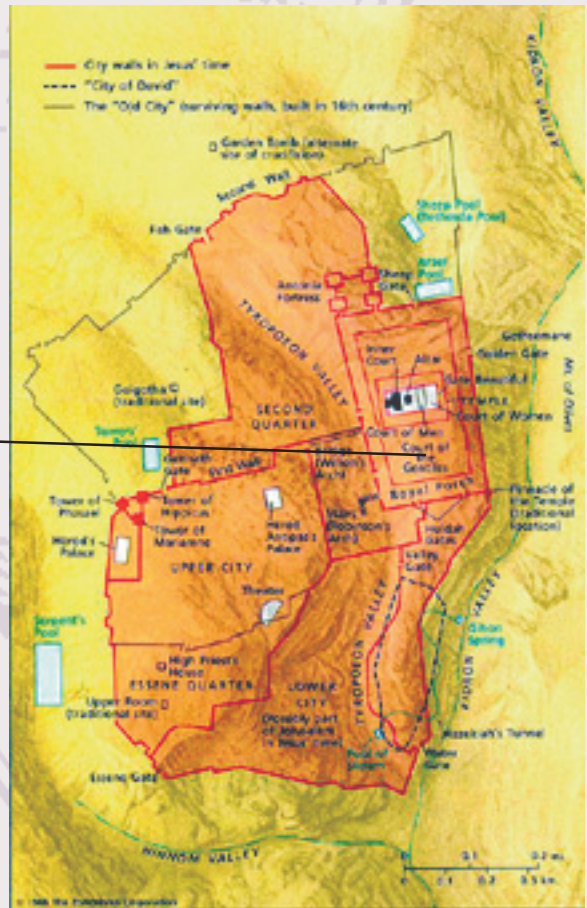
78. Plot of the Sanhedrin
14:1-2
79. Anointing at Bethany
14:3-9
80. Betrayal agreement
14:10-11

136. Plot of the Sanhedrin
22:1-2
137. Betrayal agreement
22:3-6

Matthew quite obviously provides us with a much more detailed account of the events of that Tuesday, than do the other gospel writers. John skips over it completely. Interestingly, both Matthew and Luke pretty much follow the Markan sequence here, but both insert their own additional material or else delete some of the Markan material.

The one event unclear in its chronological occurrence is the cleansing of the temple by Jesus. Matthew seems to locate it on the same day as the triumphant entry, i.e., Sunday, whereas Mark and Luke place it on Monday.

The location of these events was the outer courts of the temple in Jerusalem, in the Court of the Gentiles as indicated on the map.



b. Literary

The [Passion Week of Christ](#) constitutes a distinct literary form inside the gospels for a variety of reasons. The title is taken from the Latin *Passio Christi*, which means in English “The Suffering of Christ.” Of all the various segments of the story of Jesus in the four gospels, this part has the greatest amount of common material across the four gospels, and especially among the synoptic gospels. Additionally this segment constitutes generally about a third of the story of Jesus in three of the four gospels. Thus seven days of activities takes on a disproportionate amount of importance to the rest of the story of Jesus. This, of course, is due to the crucifixion of Jesus, and its central role to the Christian faith. Our passage is, then, a part of that material.

The Parable of the Two Sons (#131) is only found in Matthew’s gospel, and is a part of Jesus’

response to the temple authorities who questioned his authority to have cleansed the temple. The narrative setting is established up by Mt. 21:23 and 21:44-45:

21:23 (NRSV): 23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

130. Dilemma of John's authority 21:24-27

24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as 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 am doing these things.

131. Parable of the two sons 21:28-32

28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

132. Parable of the wicked tenants 21:33-43

33 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

21:44-45 (NRSV):...45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Quite clearly the literary context for our parable is to make a strong point about the disobedience of the religious leaders of the Jewish people of Jesus' day. With the repeated "you" in the long response of Jesus, vv. 24-43, he continually refers to the chief priests and the elders of the people who first challenged him, v. 23.

Jesus dealt with his enemies here by playing them off their hypocritical stance toward John the Baptist, and their fear of the masses of Jewish people who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover at that time. He also pinned his authority to the same source as John's. They refused to position themselves either positively or negatively about the divine basis of John's ministry. Conversely, Jesus didn't hesitate to position himself negatively against these leaders who had the power to get rid of him. His stinging words climax each of the three pericopes:

1. v. 27 b And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

2. vv. 31b-32 "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

3. v. 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

The importance of understanding this narrative framework for vv. 23-46 cannot be stressed enough. Any legitimate interpretation of vv. 28-32 must give careful consideration to this framework.

II. Message

The literary structure of this passage breaks down quite naturally into two segments: (1) the story, vv.28-30, and (2) its application, vv. 31-32.

a. The Story, vv. 28-30

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p><21:28> Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ; ἄνθρωπος εἶχεν τέκνα δύο. καὶ προσελθὼν τῷ πρώτῳ εἶπεν, Τέκνον, ὕπαγε σήμερον ἐργάζου ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι. <21:29> ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Οὐ θέλω, ὕστερον δὲ μεταμεληθεὶς ἀπῆλθεν. <21:30> προσελθὼν δὲ τῷ ἐτέρῳ εἶπεν ὡσαύτως. ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Ἐγὼ, κύριε, καὶ οὐκ ἀπῆλθεν.</p>	<p>28 "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' 29 "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 "The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go.</p>	<p>28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, "I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir'; but he did not go.</p>	<p>28 "But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' 29 The son answered, 'No, I won't go,' but later he changed his mind and went anyway. 30 Then the father told the other son, 'You go,' and he said, 'Yes, sir, I will.' But he didn't go.</p>

Notes:

These verses contain our parable, which is introduced by a question: "But what do you think?" (Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ;) Eugene Boring ("Matthew," vol. 8 of *New Interpreter's Bible*, iPreach) makes the following observation about the role of this question:

When Jesus asks "What do you think?" (21:28)⁴⁷¹ he does not allow their previous strategic silence to stand. Since the question is about characters in a story, it is indirect, and they cannot avoid answering it. When they do, they who will sit in judgment on Jesus already condemn themselves. Their attempt to trap Jesus has resulted in self-condemnation.

Thus the introductory question puts pressure on the religious leaders from their refusal to answer Jesus' previous questions about the source of John's authority (v. 24, NRSV): Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" The irony here is that individuals who possessed considerable power were fearful of losing that power. The loss of that power was closely linked to their popularity with the masses of the Jewish people.

Also the loss of power was linked to whether or not they could conceal their contempt for John the Baptist from the people because he had vigorously challenged them during his ministry. Earlier Matthew had described that in his story of Jesus (NRSV, [Mt. 3:1-12](#)). Note especially verses 7-10.

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the

chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

The pompous, hypocritical nature of their leadership over the Jewish people was bluntly exposed by John, and then by Jesus. They harbored disdain for both and wanted to get rid of both.

Interestingly, both Jesus and John took them on "eyeball to eyeball." The larger issue of authentic religious commitment to the God of Abraham overrode any human tendency to shy away from confrontation and controversy. It is Matthew's gospel who records the most vigorous condemnation of these leaders in [Matthew 23-24](#).

Foundational to this exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders is the issue of legitimate authority or power, particularly in the realm of religious matters. Out of [the nine Greek words](#) in the New Testament that can be translated by the English word "authority," the main one (93x in NT) is the one used here: ἐξουσία ([exousia](#)). Both the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world of Jesus were cultures very much caught up in this issue. For the Romans, authority typically meant the power to control other people for one's personal enrichment. It was available only to people born into aristocratic families, and then could be possessed mainly by massing power usually in the form of armies who would violently express the power of their leader over other people. In recently reading through a newly published history of the Roman culture both through the era of the Republic and then that of the Empire, I have been reminded again of the extreme violence of that culture from beginning to end. Killing people to achieve power, even one's own family members, was very deeply rooted in that world. Manipulation of the legal system to achieve "legitimized" power came mostly by military brute force and by bribing.

The Jewish religious leaders in our passage had bought into many aspects of that Roman pattern. The temple leaders were mostly Sadducees who came exclusively from Jewish aristocracy. Appointment to the high priesthood by this point in time had become a battle between competing Jewish families in both Jerusalem and Alexandria Egypt and largely revolved around who could offer the Romans the largest bribe to secure the appointment. Since the temple controlled close to 90 percent of the land in the province of Judea, and since Jews from all over the Mediterranean world sent an annual "temple tax" to Jerusalem in unbelievable sums of money, whoever controlled the temple controlled the basic source for the economy for all of Judea. Jesus' action of cleansing the temple had seriously undermined and challenged that authority. Since maintaining control over the crowds during the gigantic festival periods like Passover was the responsibility of the temple leaders, Jesus' actions coupled with his popularity with the masses of people present in Jerusalem at that time represented serious problems for these leaders. The Romans held them personally accountable for keeping a lid on things, and wouldn't hesitate to execute them if the crowds got out of control and the Romans had to intervene with their massive army, brought in for just such a purpose at these festivals.

Douglas R.A. Haare ("The Gospel according to Matthew," *Interpretation*, iPreach) helps put the issue in a clearer setting with his comments on the initial question (v. 23) that is foundational to the entire passage, vv. 23-44 (NRSV): "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιεῖς; καὶ τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην;).

Jesus has been challenged to present his credentials at earlier points in the story. The Pharisees, in the company of scribes (12:38) or Sadducees (16:1), demanded that he certify his status by providing a sign from heaven. In the present instance, however, the challenge is much more ominous, since it is posed by those who will constitute the court that will sentence him to death (see 26:3, 47; 27:1).

The opening question, "By what authority?" is ambiguous in the standard English translation. Readers are apt to assume that the questioners are asking, "Do you or do you not have the right to do these things?" The question is not so simple. The Greek interrogative adjective used here means either "Which of several?" (as in 19:18, "Which commandments?") or "Of what kind?" (as in 1 Cor. 15:35, "With what kind of body do they come?"). Here in Mt. 21:23 these two meanings coalesce. The question assumes that there are different kinds of authority and that Jesus is exercising authority of some kind (this is implied by the second question, "Who gave you this authority?"). It asks, "What is the nature of the authority you exercise?" The second question presupposes three possible sources: Jesus' authority is derived from God, from Satan (see 4:9; 9:34; 12:24), or from himself.

Thus in this setting the issue of [authority](#) is being played out on two levels. The leaders have brute force oriented authority, while Jesus is claiming divine authority for both John's and his ministries. The literal translation of the introductory question makes this even more clear: "And what does this seem to be to

you?" (Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ;) The 'what' goes back to the preceding statement of Jesus in verse 27 (NRSV): "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

So instead of saying directly, "My authority comes from the Heavenly Father," Jesus told a story about two sons and then pushed these leaders to identify the hero character in the story and thereby identifying themselves with the villainous character in the story. The spiritual basis of real authority is the assumption running through the story in its context. Also central is how one detects this authority. For Jesus, it rests solely on the basis of genuine obedience to the will of God. Both profession and deed must match one another if one is to secure divine approval.

The parable by its content is a [Narrative Parable](#) in form (2.c.), and follows the story line of the [Contrast Parable](#) (4.c.). Thus we can expect to find the parable's point (*Sitz im Leben*) in the contrastive depiction of the two sons. What does Jesus tell us about the two boys?

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go.

The lack of a detailedly developed story urges caution about reading too much out of this story. Additionally, the application, vv. 31-32, provides important insight into the point determination.

In a nutshell, the point of the earthly story is clear: what matters most is what we do in regard to the father's instructions. That is, word and deed must match one another. Integrity and character are critical. Whatever is promised must be kept. And especially when that promise involves a commitment to obey one's father. Hypocrisy, i.e., contradiction between word and deed, are condemned. Everyone, even in our society whether religious or not, would agree with the moral principle set forth here. Human society stands or falls in large part based upon the trustworthiness of individuals to keep promises. Governmental legal systems attempt to impose penalties on those who don't keep their commitments. But in the last analysis, there must be character deep inside people motivating them to keep their word. Otherwise, society crumbles into chaos.

But Jesus was talking about much more than this vital ethical principle in society generally. This basic principle has religious connections. And it addresses the issue of the nature of Jesus' authority to do what he did in cleansing the temple. How does it apply?

b. Its Application, vv. 31-32

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<21:31> τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός; λέγουσιν, Ὁ πρῶτος. λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οἱ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρνοι προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. <21:32> ἦλθεν γὰρ Ἰωάννης πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης, καὶ οὐκ ἐπιστεύσατε αὐτῷ, οἱ δὲ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρνοι ἐπίστευσαν αὐτῷ· ὑμεῖς δὲ ἰδόντες οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε ὕστερον τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ.	31 "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get 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 prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.	31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.	31 Which of the two was obeying his father?" They replied, "The first, of course." Then Jesus explained his meaning: "I assure you, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. 32 For John the Baptist came and showed you the way to life, and you didn't believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to turn from your sins and believe him.

Notes:

The importance of the introductory question, v. 28, also comes to the surface here when Jesus presses

the religious authorities to identify the hero in his story. They admit the obvious: the second son who was honest with his father verbally and then changed his mind to obey his father's instructions. Although they wouldn't answer his earlier question about the origin of John's authority, they now can't plead ignorance to this question without appearing completely dumb to those standing around and listening to this conversation.

But by acknowledging the obvious hero of Jesus' story, they indeed have answered the earlier question about John's authority (v. 24). And in so answering this second question they have condemned the first son who promised but didn't obey, thus saying that whoever promised to follow God's word given by John and then didn't obey it stood condemned. John had recognized this right off the bat in his words to them earlier (Mt. 3:7-10, NRSV):

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

In that same tradition of John, Jesus lowered the boom on their hypocrisy with his declaration (Mt. 21:31b-32 (NRSV):

"Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get 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 prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

Obedience to God's word is the point. The first issue is entrance into the Kingdom of God, that is, salvation (v. 31b). This statement is connected to the several "Entrance Sayings" found in the Synoptic Gospels. The almost dozen such sayings of Jesus, recorded in Matthew's gospel with some parallels in Mark and Luke, have to do with issues of salvation. These are cast around entering the Kingdom, into life or into the joy of the Lord. Note the content of these sayings:

Into the Kingdom:

Mt. 5:20 (NRSV)

20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never *enter the kingdom of heaven*.

Mt 7:21(NRSV)

21 "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will *enter the kingdom of heaven*, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Mt. 18:3 (//Mk. 10:15//Lk18:17) [NRSV]

and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never *enter the kingdom of heaven*.

Mt. 19:23, 24 (//Mk 10:23, 24; 23:13//Lk. 11:52) [NRSV]

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to *enter the kingdom of heaven*.

24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to *enter the kingdom of God*."

Into Life

Mt. 18:8 (//Mk 9:43; 18:9, cf. Mk 9:47) [NRSV]

8 "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to *enter life* maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to *enter life* with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell F129 of fire.

Mt. 19:17 (Mk 10:17) [NRSV]

17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to *enter into life*, keep the commandments."

Into the Joy of the Lord

Mt. 25:21, 23 [NRSV]

21 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; *enter into the joy of your master*.' 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; *enter into the joy of your master*.'

The entrance-into-the-kingdom sayings are more closely linked to 21:31, but all of these relate to the same spiritual principle: how one becomes a born-again Christian. Mt. 5:20 particularly throws light upon our passage since it is directly targeted to the same religious leaders as our passage.

One important result of such comparative study relates to the expression “ahead of you” (προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς). Although the surface level grammar of the Greek could imply that the religious leaders will follow the tax collectors and prostitutes into the Kingdom of God, recognizing this statement in the context of Matthew’s teachings about the religious leaders, especially the above entrance sayings, clearly argues that such an interpretation is completely contradictory to the clear teaching of Matthew’s gospel elsewhere. And the second half of verse 32 also contradicts it. After reading Jesus’ scorching denunciation of these leaders in [Mt. 23-24](#), one could hardly find a basis for seeing them as entering the Kingdom ever. Much more consistent, then, is to see Jesus declaring that the tax collectors and prostitutes enter the Kingdom, while the religious leaders are shut out.

Why? Verse 32 answers this question (NRSV): “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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

The tax collectors and prostitutes believed John and did what he told them to do ([Mt. 3:5-6](#), NRSV): “5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

But the religious leaders never believed John’s message (Mt. 3:7-10, NRSV): “7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Thus the principle of deeds matching words surfaces in this verse as critical to entering the Kingdom.

The second issue -- and the primary one in vv. 28-32 -- of the application section relates back to the larger issue of Jesus’ authority. The emphasis of Jesus’ words focus on whether or not people believed John. The tax collectors and prostitutes did, and so obeyed his words. The religious leaders didn’t believe John and thus didn’t do what John told them to do. Behind believing or not believing is clearly the conviction that John possessed authority from God to speak his message. Those who were convinced that God had sent John believed him, those who didn’t didn’t believe. Thus Jesus by linking his authority to that of John’s claims divine authority for his actions of cleansing the temple. This represents a higher authority over the temple than that claimed by these leaders. Thus Jesus went against the authority of these religious leaders because their leadership authority didn’t come from God, and the way they used their authority was corrupting God’s temple.

Sometimes we have to stand up against religious leaders. Clearly this is necessary when their use of leadership authority runs counter to God’s will. But we also have to become spiritually discerning enough to recognize when they are leading out of God’s direction, even when we may disagree with some of their decisions. This passage argues vigorously that the key to obeying is when authority has genuinely flowed from God to the individual leader. Whether or not that has happened depends upon the leader’s spiritual sensitivity to God’s leading him or her. Jesus clearly recognized the leadership of the Heavenly Father in his life. The religious leaders thought they were being led by God, but their actions betrayed a self-deception. Thus when someone said or did things that contradicted their authority, they had no ability to hear God in the other person’s words or action. Instead, they automatically assumed this individual was not only their enemy, but the enemy of God as well.

There is a huge lesson for us here. Can we hear God in the words of other people when those people oppose our stances on various issues? God may be speaking to us through their words. But He may not be! It all depends upon relationship with the Father, for both them and us. The critical phrase is “[the way of righteousness](#)” (ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης). Is the leader’s life matching his words?

Thus the central lesson from this parable for us today may very well be: how much in tune with the Father are we? Are we spiritually sensitive to hear Him speaking to us? His voice may even come through those who disagree with us. For Matthew’s initial readership, this parable reconfirmed that Jesus, rather than the scribes, was the one speaking the words of God. The same must be true of us today.

GNT Diagram

²⁸ δὲ
 1 **τί ὑμῖν δοκεῖ;**
 2 **ἄνθρωπος εἶχεν τέκνα δύο.**
 καὶ
 προσελθὼν τῷ πρώτῳ
 3 **εἶπεν,**
 α Τέκνον,
 ὑπάγε
 σήμερον
 ἐργάζου
 ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι.
²⁹ δὲ
 ἀποκριθεὶς
 4 **ὁ...εἶπεν,**
 β οὐ θέλω,
 δὲ
 ὕστερον
 μεταμεληθεὶς
 5 **ἀπῆλθεν.**
³⁰ δὲ
 προσελθὼν τῷ ἐτέρῳ
 6 **εἶπεν**
 ὡσαύτως.
 δὲ
 ἀποκριθεὶς
 7 **ὁ...εἶπεν,**
 γ Ἐγώ,
 κύριε,
 καὶ
 8 **οὐκ ἀπῆλθεν.**
³¹ **τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς;**
 Α **λέγουσιν,**
 10 **ὁ πρῶτος.**
 Β **λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς,**
 11 Ἄμην
λέγω ὑμῖν
 ὅτι οἱ τελῶναι
 καὶ
 αἱ πόρναι προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς
 /-----|
 εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

32

12

γὰρ
ἦλθεν Ἰωάννης

πρὸς ὑμᾶς
ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης,

13

καὶ
οὐκ ἐπιστεύσατε αὐτῷ,

14

δὲ
οἱ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρναι ἐπίστευσαν αὐτῷ·

15

δὲ
ιδόντες
ὑμεῖς...οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε
ἕστερον
τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ.