

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2026
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Matthew 21:23-32, Philippians 2:1-13

During the ordinary time after Pentecost this year we are reading through Matthew's gospel. For one reason or another we skip over bits here and there. Moving from last week to this week, we skipped over the Palm Sunday story. So, this morning, Jesus has already entered Jerusalem for Passover. The crowds have welcomed him as king. He has ridden into the city on a donkey. He has cleansed the temple. The religious establishment is alarmed. The tension is rising. The cross is now only days away.

The scene this morning begins with a confrontation. Jesus is teaching in the temple when the chief priests and elders approach him with a question: *"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"*

On the surface, it sounds like a reasonable question. Authority matters. It matters who speaks in God's name. But Jesus recognizes that they are not seeking understanding. They are seeking control. They are not interested in truth. They are interested in preserving their position and the power that comes with it.

So Jesus responds with a question of his own concerning John the Baptist. Was John's baptism from heaven or merely human? The religious leaders find themselves trapped. If they acknowledge John's divine authority, they must

explain why they rejected him. If they deny it, they fear the crowds who regard John as a true prophet.

And so they choose the safest answer possible: *"We do not know."*

What is striking here is that the people entrusted with spiritual leadership are unable to recognize God's activity because they have become invested in protecting themselves. Their concern is not faithfulness. Their concern is maintaining power.

Jesus then tells a brief but devastating parable. A father asks two sons to work in the vineyard. The first son says, "I will not." Later, however, he changes his mind and goes. The second son says, "I go, sir," but never actually goes. Which one did the will of the father?

The answer is obvious. The first son. The son who initially refused ultimately obeyed. The son who spoke all the right words never followed through.

Jesus then delivers one of the most shocking statements in the Gospel: *"The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."* Imagine hearing that in the temple courts. Imagine being one of the chief priests.

Jesus is not praising exploitation, dishonesty, or sin. He is praising repentance. The tax collectors and prostitutes heard John's call to

repentance and changed direction. They recognized their need for grace. They acknowledged their brokenness. They entrusted themselves to God's mercy.

The religious leaders, meanwhile, maintained the appearance of righteousness while refusing the transformation God was offering. The issue is not outward morality versus outward immorality. The issue is repentance versus self-righteousness. The issue is whether one is willing to admit, "I was wrong."

The first son says the wrong thing but eventually does the right thing. The second son says the right thing but does the wrong thing. Jesus is exposing the danger of performative religion. Performative religion looks holy on the surface. It knows the vocabulary. It follows the rituals. It occupies the proper seats. It says the expected prayers. It can even defend correct doctrine. Yet beneath all those appearances may lie a heart untouched by grace. The religious leaders in this passage had become experts at appearing faithful. What they lacked was the humility to receive God's surprising work. That temptation remains with the Church today.

We know how to say the Creed. We know when to stand and kneel. We know the prayers and hymns. We know how Christians are supposed to talk. Yet Jesus asks a deeper question: Are we actually doing the Father's will? Has our worship led us to repentance? Has our religion led us to love? Has our faith changed the way we live?

There is a profound difference between appearing righteous and becoming righteous. The kingdom belongs not to those who have mastered the performance, but to those who have surrendered themselves to God's mercy.

This is where our reading connects beautifully with the great hymn in the letter to the Philippians. Paul tells us: *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant."*

The religious leaders in Matthew are preoccupied with authority. They are concerned about status, rank, legitimacy, and power. Jesus possesses genuine authority, yet he does not cling to power. He does not grasp for privilege. He does not demand recognition.

He empties himself. He becomes a servant. He humbles himself. He becomes obedient even to death on a cross. The contrast could not be sharper. The leaders use religion to protect their authority. Jesus uses his authority to serve. The leaders seek honor. Jesus embraces humility. The leaders fear losing status. Jesus willingly lays status aside.

The chief priests ask, "By what authority do you do these things?" The answer, revealed not only in his words but in his life, is that Jesus exercises the authority of self-giving love. His authority comes from the Father and is expressed through humility, mercy, and sacrifice. That is the kind of authority

that transforms the world. And it is the kind of authority the kingdom recognizes.

The tax collectors and prostitutes recognized something in Jesus and in John that the religious leaders missed. They recognized grace. When someone knows they need mercy, mercy becomes precious. When someone knows they are lost, a shepherd becomes good news. When someone knows they are broken, healing becomes possible.

But when someone is convinced of their own righteousness, grace can become invisible. Perhaps that is why Jesus' warning remains so unsettling. The greatest obstacle to entering the kingdom may not be obvious sin. It may be spiritual pride. It may be believing that because we know the right answers, we have no need to change. It may be assuming that our past faithfulness exempts us from ongoing repentance.

The Gospel continually invites us to become like the first son. Not necessarily the rebellion. Not the refusal. But the willingness to rethink, to turn around, to repent. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means a change of mind, a new way of seeing. The first son changes his mind and then changes his actions. That is what repentance looks like.

And the wonderful news is that God's kingdom is built for repentant people. There is hope for those who have failed. There is hope for those who have

wandered. There is hope for those who have made a mess of their lives. There is even hope for those who have spent years relying on appearances.

Because God's grace is always reaching out, inviting us back into the vineyard. The question before us is not whether we have always said the right words. The question is whether we will say yes to God today. Whether we will repent today. Whether we will follow Christ today.

For in the kingdom of God, it is not the performance that matters. It is not religious appearance. It is not status or position or prestige. What matters is a heart transformed by grace. What matters is humility. What matters is obedience. What matters is joining the Son, who did not cling to power but emptied himself in love, and following him into the Father's vineyard.