

Matthew 21:23-32
A second chance

There's an old children's game that I think we've probably all played at some time over the years, that's all about authority, if you stop and think about it. I think I first came across it as "O'Grady says", but it's more commonly just known as "**Simon Says**".

You know how it goes. One person stands at the front, and issues orders such as **Put your hands on your head**. Only, if they just say *that*, you mustn't do it. You're *out* if you do it. You only have to do these things if they say, *Simon says ...* do this or that. And in that case, you're out if you *disobey*.

Implication: *I* don't have authority to order you to do things - but someone does. O'Grady. Or Simon. Or, I've heard more recently, **Boris**. I think it was my granddaughter I heard saying something along those lines: *Boris says we're not allowed to ...* something or other.

And actually, that has been a live issue all the way through this last year and a half. We have been told at those **Downing Street briefings** that certain liberties that we have taken for granted - things like free association, all this stuff about wearing masks, all of it - well, right now, *no!* Laws have been enacted making it not impossible but illegal to do all sorts of things. It is entirely a fair question to ask, at a time like this: *who gives you the right to ...?*

Human beings are typically very sensitive to this, presumably because we all feel we have this right to self-determination. So ... why should I do what you say? What I should I *believe* what you tell me is true? What authority - that I consider myself obliged to obey - gives you that right?

And this is precisely what we find in today's passage, I hope you noticed. We're three-quarters of the way through Matthew's account of Jesus' life, and in what turns out to be just the last few final days before Jesus' arrest and mock trial and execution. It's plain that Jesus knows things are reaching this kind of culmination, because, starting in this chapter, he lets rip with some of the most confrontational things he ever said concerning the Jewish religious establishment.

And yet it starts with *them* confronting him. Remember what has happened. After a couple of years teaching mainly out in the wilds north of Jerusalem, the area of Galilee in particular, Jesus has now come to Jerusalem. He has told his followers over and over that this would lead to a final confrontation ... and his death ... and his resurrection. As soon as Peter is gifted with that notion that this Jesus is no mere man, he is not even one more prophet, but ...

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
(Matthew 16:16)

... then Jesus starts to teach them what that will actually mean:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to

Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

And now ... **alarm bells** should be ringing ... here we are in Jerusalem; here are the elders and chief priests!

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, ...

(Matthew 21:23)

The word that Matthew uses there for “came up to him” implies not just that these people happened to encounter him, but that they deliberately set out to accost him. They have, we might say, **a bone to pick** with him. There’s just the fact that he is teaching there, in the temple, *their* home ground, for starters. But there’s more:

... and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

(Matthew 21:23)

Who says you’re allowed to do this, Jesus? Not just the teaching, I think, by the way it’s written: see the “these things”. That could refer to several other things, but I suspect the most incendiary of them was when Jesus what we call “cleansed the temple”, just a couple of verses earlier

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

(Matthew 21:12)

So you can see how this would fit with the chief priests’ and elders’ complaint here. How *dare* you do this?

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

(Matthew 21:23)

This *is* their home turf. They are **closing in for the kill**. Or so they think. There is no way - they think - that Jesus can answer this. If he cites any human source of authority, they will probably quite rightly say that this *is* the temple, this *is* where they have the supreme authority - so Jesus will have to back down. Or if he says that he has authority from God, they will accuse him of blasphemy. **Win-win!**

And yet, **Jesus answers his challengers with the first of several parables that exposes their obstinacy**

But I don’t want us to stop there today. It’s not good enough for us to go away thinking - or simply confirmed in our thinking - that those guys back then were pretty obstinate and awkward, that they were a shame to their religious profession. No, there’s stuff here that concerns *us*. *We* can behave like those elders and chief priests. *We* can behave like either of those two sons in the parable. And therefore *we* need to think about

ourselves when we read these words.

And we need also to see what Matthew is telling us about Jesus, too. It's entirely too possible to just read the Bible to see what it tells us about ourselves - when actually Matthew has written this account of the life of Jesus so that we can find out what we need to know about Jesus. That's where we're going to start as we go through the passage:

The one who *does* have authority (23-27)

The one who said No (28-29)

The one who said Yes (30)

The one hope for people like us (31-32)

- **The one who *does* have authority (23-27)**

So Jesus, we can perhaps imagine, is about to teach - or perhaps this little gang of the high-ups have waited until he has started to teach, so that they can catch him in the act, so to speak - somewhere in the grounds of the temple. It's their space, so they think they have the right to intervene in this case of irregularity. It's actually not so different from what we would do here in church, really, only we call it "guarding the pulpit". If someone came in - or even had been invited to come and preach - but they start teaching heresy, we wouldn't politely wait until they had finished. And nor do Jesus' accusers.

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?"

(Matthew 21:23)

And as so often, Jesus does not just simply answer their question. Actually, he *does* provide them with an answer, but it's one that is far more profound. By taking rather more of the initiative himself, and bouncing back a question of his own, he makes these people think - and he makes it far less easy for them to avoid facing their own deficient attitudes.

So he's not cheating here. He's not trying to make them follow some red herring. This is a highly pertinent question in this whole area of authority. *You talk about my authority. But what about John the Baptist's authority? How did you respond to that? If you continue to dodge that issue, how likely is it that you will consider any answer I give with fairness?*

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. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"

(Matthew 21:24-25)

What was *John's* source of authority, this is saying. Did God send him? Was he a prophet in the full sense of the word, commissioned by God himself? Or was he just a popular figure adulated by the crowds?

You get the impression that they realise they are batting on a rather sticky wicket here now. There is no immediate answer.

And they discussed it among themselves, ...

(Matthew 21:25)

And Matthew shows us that they are not looking first and foremost for a truthful answer, but a political one. Not, *what is true?* But, *what is expedient, what is a publicly acceptable answer?* And they realise that they *don't* have a good, publicly acceptable answer. Just as they thought Jesus would be caught by their question, now *they* are very publicly caught by *his*. And without a good answer, and soon, their own authority - or how people perceived it, at least - would very quickly become rather dented.

So they discuss the possible options, and see that neither is good for them.

“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

(Matthew 21:25-26)

So their solution is a politically expedient *lie*.

So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”

(Matthew 21:27)

Then, says Jesus, he is not obliged to answer their question.

And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

(Matthew 21:27)

If they are not, by their own admission, competent to assess John the Baptist ... see where this is pointing us now? ... how could they be competent to judge someone far greater ... the one John had borne witness to:

“Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’”

(Acts 13:24-25)

Folks, what authority do *you* give Jesus in your lives? That will feature quietly but very definitely in the parable he now goes on to speak. But do you just hear him, or do you *listen* to him? Do you take what he says as true, and authoritative? With authority over you and me? With authority over the whole of creation?

With authority to declare what is true and false.

With authority to stipulate what is sinful and what is righteous.

With authority to instruct us on how we do church, how we spend our money and our time, how we conduct our lives in any and every significant aspect.

But time to move on to some more specific applications of that. On into the parable, which, just by the way that Matthew places it here, we have to think of as Jesus developing this point, and pressing it deeper. First ...

- **The one who said No (28-29)**

“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.’”

(Matthew 21:28)

Don't try to make this into an allegory. We don't have to think, *Who does the man represent? God? In which case, who are the two sons ...?* Just take this as the story version of a line-drawing: no detail, just enough of the bare bones for us to be able to work out what is meant, with very little fuss.

So it's an example from everyday Jewish life in those days. A family own a vineyard. And it would be entirely reasonable for a Jewish father to say to his son ... or sons ... that there was work needing doing in the vineyard, and it was their job to get to it. He wouldn't even have had to specify what work to do, because the boys would have grown up learning the necessary skills. The “first” might mean the older son, the firstborn ... or it is just irrelevant to the story which is which. But ... shock horror!!

“And he answered, ‘I will not,’ ...”

(Matthew 21:29)

That would have been shocking in those days. Nowadays we're much more used to youthful defiance, but it would have had Jesus' hearers rocking back on their heels. But the story really speeds though. No time to think big implications here yet.

“... but afterward he changed his mind and went.”

(Matthew 21:29)

So .. no problem ... or is it? I know this is only a minor point in Jesus' little story, but I'd like to expand on it just briefly now, and I'd like us to come back to it for a while longer this evening. And it's about our emotions.

You see, sometimes it seems to me that Christians feel they must expect never to have negative emotions, and that they have somehow failed if they do. I remember way back, probably just after Jenny and I were married, meeting up with some older Christians who had quite a large young family. And the Dad said that he thought it was appropriate to - I'll just say “chastise”, but I don't think that necessarily meant “smack”, just intervene to punish in some way - every time they even saw on their children's faces that they were not immediately willing to do what as they were told.

It struck me at the time that that was seriously over the top, and I guess that, all these years later, that couple have come to a different opinion. I think they were too much under the influence of a rather unbalanced group in the Christian world of those days. At the very least, with the number of kids they eventually had, they

would most likely have found that punishing every least *even potential* disobedience like that would be a very full-time job!

But the bigger question is whether *God* is like that, surely? What does *God* do when he sees that our thoughts are still far from perfect?

I am quite amazed by some of the nonsense I've sometimes been expected to sing. Not that they're particularly current songs, but I remember words like this, quite some time ago.

*The Saviour has come with His mighty power
And spoken His peace to my soul
And all of my life from that very hour
I've yielded to His control*

Folks, I have to say that is just nonsense. I can't sing that. It's just not true. I'd even be so bold as to say that *you* can't sing it true. We have *not* yielded every moment of our lives to the Lordship of Christ. How about this one?

*At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light
And the burden of my heart rolled away
It was there by faith I received my sight
And now I am happy all the day*

OK, I think I am usually a fairly cheerful person, but that is still not true. I can't sing that. And I am totally convinced that that is *not* the average Christian's experience. Or actually *any* Christian's experience.

There are times when we *do not* yield to the voice of the Holy Spirit, clearly pointing us to our duty of obedience to Jesus Christ. There are time when we are not just not "happy", but discontent, angry, envious, all sorts of things like that. We are like that first son in the story, who said *No*.

But I reckon there is a serious nugget of gold there in that single simple line of Scripture, in that little story Jesus composed and related. Because Jesus focuses not so much on the initial response, but the subsequent conduct.

"And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went."

(Matthew 21:29)

"Changed his mind" is not quite as strong a word in Greek as the one we more commonly have translated as "repented", but it's not far off. In just this line, we're not given any insight into just why this change of mind came about. It could be that the boy realises that he has behaved atrociously towards his father and is seriously sorry about it. It could be that he has just realised that things will be made uncomfortable for him if he doesn't knuckle down and do as he was told.

But the bottom line was that he *did* - eventually - obey. And folks, I think it was quite possible that we can obsess too much about our initial emotional reactions

to things. We might be tempted to anger, or obstructiveness, or envy, or lust ... but do we follow those emotions through? Or do we instead curb those emotions by our wills?

That “I will not” phrase could have been translated not as an outright *No*, but - here is the telling thing - *I don't want to*. But, in time, “I don't want to” gave way to “It is right for me to”, and the boy *does* obey.

Folks, this evening, I want us to spend a bit of time thinking through the practicalities of how *we* can learn to obey, when it comes to situations in which *we* initially say *I don't want to*. It's easy enough to just outline it here - but it will take some working out in our lives, I think. So that's on your notes sheet to perhaps consider in advance for this evening, if you're going to join us at Cafe Church.

But ... let's get back to this deceptively simple story, and ...

- **The one who said Yes (30)**

You could almost predict what was coming up. The other son. The other side of the coin. The opposite reaction. Yes, *totally* opposite.

“And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go.”

(Matthew 21:30)

Actually, the word “go” isn't even there, as Matthew wrote it. It's just “I, sir”. A very respectful “sir”. But I wonder if this very proper term of address masks something different in the heart. Do you think that “I” could be a hint of *Look, I am doing what Dad says. I am the obedient one, unlike that other waste of space.*

This parable really does make me think about that much more elaborate one that we usually call “The Prodigal Son”, but is actually *also* about *two* lost sons. In that case it is specifically the younger son who grossly insults his father, and, as Luke recorded it ...

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ ...”

(Luke 15:11-12)

Perhaps you remember the kind of comment that got from the older brother, towards the end of the story. The Prodigal has returned home, but his brother does not rejoice. He *fumes* at the wastrel's acceptance back into the family.

“But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”

(Luke 15:30)

So perhaps, in this must shorter parable from Matthew's pen, we can see something of that self-righteous attitude in brother number 2, with his *I, sir*. And

perhaps that has something of a message for us, too.

Is it possible that at times we rather enjoy having people that we can look down on - people who don't treat the Bible as seriously as us, people who don't live as wholesomely as us, people who have slipped up in some aspect of their Christian discipleship - so that we can say our *I, sir* ... subtly implying "*I* ... in contrast to *they*"

...

Again, I might be reading in more than is there. But that's a question for us to consider tonight, too. How can we note those kinds of things with, hopefully, concern, but not venture into self-righteousness. If we're told that ...

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

(Galatians 6:1)

... how can we ensure that we do *all* of what that verse says, in the right spirit?

Perhaps we need to remember that when it comes to this little story of Jesus', *neither* of the sons comes out squeaky-clean. But one of them, at least, seems to have learned a lesson. See how Jesus concludes now:

- **The one hope for people like us** (31-32)

First, a simple question that has only one possible answer, summing it all up.

Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first."

(Matthew 21:31)

That's the one who initially disobeyed, remember. Or the *ones*, Jesus is now going to say. See just who he says these *ones* are: the outrageous sinners!

Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you."

(Matthew 21:31)

So Jesus is speaking, remember, to those religious elite. The ones that everyone looked up to, and thought pillars of purity. And yet, Jesus is saying that it is the people at totally the opposite end of the religious and societal spectrum that are getting somewhere in the kingdom of God *ahead of those religious guys*.

The tax collectors ... collaborators with the Romans, traitors to the nation ... how could God show any kind of favour to them? And prostitutes, well ... really, Jesus, is there the possibility of grace and forgiveness and cleansing for people like *that*?

That is *exactly* what Jesus does say. Because ... look what happened, back with that case of John the Baptist - Jesus drops his name in again now to conclude

this section. John came proclaiming that possibility of being made right with God again. And different people responded in different ways.

“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.”

(Matthew 21:32)

See what makes the difference? Not just hearing, but believing. Believing in the sense that you do something different. I think we are now talking about that “change of mind” in the sense of “repent” now.

“And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.”

(Matthew 21:32)

Speaking to those leaders again, he points out what they failed to do. Change your minds. Like that first son I just told you about. Yes, you have initially walked away with an *I will not*. That means you’re just the same as those other people, those tax-collectors, those prostitutes, those liars and cheats and wife-beaters and all the rest. It is the ultimate level playing-field. But God has levelled that playing-field with a purpose.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

(Romans 11:32)

If you accept that you have done things wrong before God, if you accept that you are guilty of, above everything else, just refusing to let God have his rightful place ruling over every part of your life ... if you accept that you are guilty of that ... then you *qualify* for grace. If you admit that you have disobeyed God ... then you are invited to ask for his mercy.

You know, I just love the way Jesus speaks here. He’s not writing these self-righteous religious people off, and he’s not writing the tax-collectors and such off, either. He’s saying that those terribly irreligious people can find - *have* found - the way back to God.

And he’s solemnly drawing the attention of these terribly religious people to the fact that their religion has just blinded them to the reality of who it is in front of them. He uses those weighty words ...

“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”

(Matthew 21:31)

Folks, I need to ask you this morning. Who is going into the Kingdom of God before you? This might be your first time here - in which case, the invitation is open to you today, to turn from your sins, to whatever extent you understand that at present, to put your trust in Jesus Christ, and to enter the new life in the Kingdom of God.

And it might be your hundredth or your thousandth time here ... but you still haven't actually entered that Kingdom of God for yourself. You've used the *I, sir* to cover up what is actually an *I will not* ...

So it's finally time for *you*, too, to come.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life.”

(John 5:24)

Whoever .. that's you, whether it's the first or the millionth time that you have heard this. And Jesus Christ invites you to believe in him, to put your trust in him, *today*.

Take that second chance