

**The Two Sons**  
**September 25, 2011**  
**Matthew 21:23-32**

<sup>23</sup>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?" <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>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?' <sup>26</sup>But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." <sup>27</sup>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.

<sup>28</sup>"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup>He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup>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.

<sup>32</sup>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.

No one likes to be confronted. No one likes to be told he is wrong or out of line. No one wants to be told she is acting like a scoundrel. No one likes it but Lord knows we all need it from time to time. Perhaps you can remember a time when someone sat you down and helped you to see the error of your ways. I know I can. I was in ninth grade. I was sitting in the chair by the phone at our house on 29<sup>th</sup> street in West Des Moines. I can't remember what I did that made my mother snap – but snap she did. Evidently, I had just reached her last straw. She'd had enough.

It wasn't a long speech. It wasn't eloquent. It was succinct and devastating. And it was effective.

I'll set the stage for you. I was a religious kid. I went to Bible camp and loved Jesus. I read my Bible and thought I knew everything. I wanted to save the world. I went to church, was active in my youth group, and a leader when allowed. I was also teenager. I cared more about friends than family. I wanted to fit in and at the same time stand out. I obsessed about clothes, hair, and all that stuff. I didn't like myself and often times wished I could trade in my family for a newer model. In other words I had all the usual teenage angst. Evidently, I wasn't all that pleasant at home. Who knew???

To meet my mother now you might be inclined to think she is a quiet and shy person – the kind of person who would never raise her voice or wield a sharp tongue. That is mostly true until you push her to her absolute limit – all I can say is, "thar' she blows!"

She had reached her limit with me – and what followed I will never forget. Here is what she said to me:

“You have everyone at that church thinking you are some kind of an angel but then you come home and treat us like \*x\*!\*(expletive deleted.) You act like a \*xx!\*\*(expletive deleted) you are nothing but a hypocrite!”

Now she might deny that she ever said this to me – but I know it did. I know it did because those words pierced my heart. She was right. I was a hypocrite. I think at the time I was more concerned about being a hypocrite than treating them badly – either way I got the message. Things had to change. I needed to repent. I couldn’t say one thing and do another.

I don’t know how I responded – or if I ever said, “I’m sorry.” But I did change and life at home became much more tolerable for all of us.

How would you like to be responsible for telling the leader of a great nation that he needs to repent and shape up? (I’m surprised all your hands didn’t go up) What if this leader had the power to kill you on a moments notice? King David was a great king – the greatest Israel ever had. One day, while enjoying a little r & r from the battlefield, he noticed a beautiful woman bathing on her roof. He had to have her – it didn’t matter that she was married – he was king. When she turned up pregnant David had to find a way to make it look like the baby was her husband’s – and when that didn’t work – he made sure her husband got killed in battle – and he married her as quick as he could. No one dared do the math.

David did, however, have on his staff a resident prophet named Nathan. He was part of the checks and balances of the monarchy. He could not let David think this was acceptable to God. So he decided to tell David a little story. It was the story about a man who had a pet sheep and he loved that sheep like a child. A rich man up the road had some company arrive and he refused to kill a lamb from his own flock to feed the visitor but rather demanded the poor man’s sheep to be slaughtered.

David was angered by the story. “What kind of person would do such a thing?” To which Nathan replied, “You are the man!” And he laid into the king until he was certain David understood the error of his ways. Nathan took a big chance confronting the king. I’m sure there was a sigh of relief when David repented. In Psalm 51, David pleads with God, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

Our passage for today is the end of a two day confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. It began the day before when Jesus rode into town on a donkey to the shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Then he went to the temple and disrupted business as usual by overturning the tables of the money changers and sellers of animals for sacrifice. He then set up shop in the temple healing the blind and the lame.

The next morning, when Jesus returned to the city, the chief priests and the elders were waiting for him. They could be heard muttering in the background – “Who does this guy think he is?” They conspired to trap him

Their question sounds harmless enough, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Recognizing it was a trap Jesus responded with a question that was turned the tables on the leaders. Suddenly, they were the ones on the defense. Jesus asked them about John the Baptist, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” Their dilemma is explained to us in the following verses, ““If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” They didn’t have the courage to say what they believed – that John was a quack and Jesus was too – no, they were afraid to say out loud what they really believed so they said, “We don’t know.” If they couldn’t answer Jesus’ question, there was no reason for Jesus to answer their question.

Jesus then completes his smack down with a little story. A man has two sons that he asks to work in the vineyard. One said he would go and work but never showed. The other son said, “no” but then changed his mind and went to the vineyard to work. Which one, Jesus asked, did the will of his father? The chief priests and elders answered correctly when they identified the son that said “no”, but then went to work.

The question, “Which son are you?” is never asked but is certainly implied – the chief priests and elders are the ones who say all the right things but don’t do the work. Racketeers and prostitutes may not say all the right things, but they were the ones who changed their minds and actually walked the walk.

Jesus was calling out the religious leaders for their hypocrisy. They wore the fancy clothes. They strutted around the temple. They put on a good show. They lined their own pockets and turned the temple into a racket. When John called for repentance, they dismissed him, while common folks repented and changed their lives. When Jesus challenged them, they dug in their heels and conspired to kill him. They refused to repent.

In our tradition we boldly profess with our lips, “I believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and I proclaim him Savior and Lord.” Do our lives say as much? Who is doing the will of the father and who is just talking about it?

If there is a virtue promoted in this passage it is the virtue of humility – or at the very least the ability to take a good honest look at one’s life and see what needs to change.

I stumbled upon a 18<sup>th</sup> century quote this week by a man named Thomas Carlyle. “Of all acts of man repentance is the most divine. The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none.” Amen to that.

(Thomas Carlyle (4 December 1795 – 5 February 1881) was a Scottish satirical writer, essayist, historian and teacher during the Victorian era.)