

Sermon – September 27, 2020  
“Go work in the vineyard today”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 21:23-32

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen*

Good Morning! Welcome to the first Sunday of fall here on the Northern Neck. The corn harvest, as you know, is underway. Kay and I can once again see the cars on Hacks Neck Road. We continue to complete our preparations for Charge Conference and will be meeting with our District Supervisor via Zoom this coming Saturday at 5:00 pm. I will be at Fairfields. If you would like to be a part of the Charge Conference, please bring your mask and join me there, or you can join the Zoom session from your home using the link in the bulletin we emailed. Our ability to meet and worship in person is a blessing, and we are continuing to grow the opportunities for safe in-person interactions. We now are able to have in-person Sunday School at Afton and a yard sale at Fairfields. Please consider your personal safety when deciding if you will come to an in-person meeting or join via Zoom. We had a great time this past Sunday at the on-line fellowship dinner via Zoom at Afton and enjoyed our first round of Bible Trivia as well. I am sure that those who attended are now studying God’s word more closely in preparation for our next trivia event.

A little background this morning might help put this scripture into context. In the preceding days, Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the shouts of a celebrating crowd. He has also cleared the temple of the commerce that was on going in his Father’s house, a house that was to be a house of prayer for all people. On this day, Jesus is teaching somewhere in the temple complex, probably in the court of the Gentiles where anyone would be able to hear his teaching. He is with the crowd, teaching them about the in-breaking kingdom of God.

As he is teaching, the Pharisees and elders arrive. Notice they don’t ask about his health or if he has a moment to talk. They come as those who have God-given authority over the

temple, and they want answers to their questions. I understand their actions as rude, but their approach is a standard approach for debate among rabbis, a debate characterized by an opening hostile question followed by a counter question from the second debater, then an admission, and ending with a final sharp or witty reply. For this engagement with Jesus, they come in force with Pharisees and elders or Sadducees. This is the group of leaders who claim God-given authority over the temple. This is the group Jesus has offended through his actions of clearing the temple of commerce, healing people, and now teaching. All of these things are to be done only by those with real authority. They seem to have come to demand that Jesus reveal his authority and then allow them to overrule it with their own and put an end to his actions and his threats to their authority. They don't seem to have expected much of a defense from Jesus, and they may have been expecting him to openly claim his authority comes from God, allowing them to accuse Jesus of blasphemy and then to have him killed. I think they are unprepared for an encounter with the great debater, one who teaches with authority, one who is the Word of God.

So, they ask their opening questions of debate, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus does not fall into their trap, but in standard rabbi debate form, he replies with a question, only one in comparison to their two questions, a question for them to answer before he will give them answers to theirs. Jesus asks them about the baptism of John, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Jesus' question may seem a little odd but it is well crafted. His question links his ministry, his actions, to the actions of John, whom the crowd saw as a prophet sent from God. The crowd believes John's baptism was from God. The religious leaders found it offensive and would not respond. If the religious leaders allow Jesus to be connected to God through John, they will be admitting that they knew John was sent by God, and that they also should have responded to his call to repentance and baptism. If they acknowledge John's authority is from God, they will also be acknowledging that Jesus also receives God's authority through his connection to John. This is no random question or a delay tactic by Jesus to gain time to come up with a better answer. This line of questioning forces this group of authority seekers to admit themselves that Jesus is from God.

The religious leaders debate their answer among themselves. I can just see them looking at Jesus after hearing his question and then one of them saying, "Huddle up men, we need to talk!" They were not prepared for this response. This is not a direction they had intended their

demand for the source of Jesus' authority to go. As they debate their options to respond to Jesus among themselves, Jesus waits. First, they debate answering that John's baptism authority was from heaven. That means it was from God and that, as leaders with authority from God, they also should have believed John's message, repented, and been baptized. This also means that Jesus' authority, because of his connection to John by John's words about Jesus and Jesus' baptism by John, would also come from heaven and they, the real authorities from God, should be listening to Jesus. That is not going to work. They know they are God's authority. They have the law. They have the answers. What is their next option? If they say that John's authority was from humans, then this crowd, that is convinced John was a prophet from God and follows Jesus everywhere and is right here with him in the temple listening to his unauthorized teaching, will riot. Rome will not allow riots and will come and take away the religious leaders' authority over the temple. They can't have that. What does that leave? They decide they had better not answer Jesus' question. That is their only option in this debate. They decide they will tell him that they don't know. Yes, that will work. That is their only option. So, after their deliberations, they tell Jesus, "We don't know." Is it okay to tell a lie in the temple? How about in church? How about in the presence of God? In the presence of God Incarnate? I am asking for a friend.

Now, since they will not answer, the debate is over. Jesus will not tell them the source of his authority because they have not answered his question, and neither will he tell them by what authority he is doing these things. They have lost honor in the sight of the crowd, and Jesus is built up and has more honor. He has debated the religious authorities, on their home turf, and they could not answer his question. But Jesus does not stop there. He asks them a question, "What do you think?" He seems to be asking them into a new debate, not with a hostile question, as they had asked him, but with a question that initially seems to seek their wisdom and so they listen. We now enter into round two of the debate. The score is Jesus one, religious authorities zero.

We know this parable that Jesus tells. A man has two sons and goes to the first and asks him to go and work in the vineyard. His son tells his father, "I will not," but then later changes his mind and goes. The father goes to his second son and asks him also to go and work in the vineyard, and he replies, "I will go," but he does not. After Jesus tells them the parable, he asks the religious authorities, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They don't need to debate this answer. They answer, "the first," the one who did not go at first but then changed his

mind and went. They have not realized what their answer means. They now stand condemned as they knew John the Baptist was from God but they did not go, repent and follow God's will for them. Jesus has just appealed to their wisdom and they have responded in a manner that points out that they, like the first son, have not listened to God the Father nor followed His will for them. They are those who were given the law but are not obedient to it. Round two goes to Jesus. Score: Jesus 2, religious authorities 0. Jesus does not stop there but moves on to make a comment about their answer. To make plain to them what their answer means, Jesus tells the religious authorities, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 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."

Tax collectors and prostitutes, those whom the religious authorities most despise, those they are certain they are far better than, those for whom they have no compassion and those they are certain that God has condemned; these will go into the kingdom of God ahead of them? Can we catch this radical statement by Jesus to the religious authorities? The woman who lives at the edge of town in shame, brokenness, pain, uncleanness, and sin and daily struggles to survive will go into the kingdom of God before these religious authorities who have God's Law? A prostitute who has sold herself, all she has, to live, someone they do not even think should be present in this city with God's temple, someone they think is so unclean that she is to be killed with a stone so she is not touched; she will go into the kingdom of God before them? And tax collectors? Those who have sold themselves for lust of money? Those who are so greedy that they would collect taxes for the heathen Romans? How could they ever get into the kingdom of God? They are nobodies, people who sold themselves for money, sinners all, and Jesus thinks tax collectors will go into the kingdom of God before them, those who keep the Law? What kind of radical unauthorized teaching is this? This radical statement would make the religious authorities' heads hurt with questions. But this is who God sent Jesus to redeem, sinners, the lost, the broken, the scarred, those outside of society, those unseen in our cities, those with no hope for redemption. God sent Jesus to the house at the edge of town to a woman so broken, so wounded, so shame filled that all she can do is hide and live in her shame. Jesus goes to her and knocks on the door, shows her mercy, love, and forgiveness and invites her into the kingdom of God. He comes to give his life in exchange for hers so that she may live for eternity with God in His kingdom.

Jesus came for the least of these; those who are lost he has come to find. It is beyond radical teaching. It is the good shepherd seeking the lost sheep, no matter where they are, what they have done, where they are hiding. Jesus leaves the ninety-nine and seeks the one, laying down his life that they may have abundant life. The religious authorities who watched John baptize the prostitutes and tax collectors and saw the change in their lives did not submit to God's will through John and repent as well and seek God's will in their lives. These sinners represent the first son, the ones who at first said no to God and yes to sin, but changed their minds and repented and went to work in the vineyard, God's in-breaking kingdom. The religious authorities represent the second son, who says he will do God's will but does not. They are not obedient to God. This round of the debate ends with a score of Jesus 3, religious authorities 0. Jesus is not done. He will tell two more parables, each condemning the religious authorities more than its predecessor. We will save those for another day.

Before we leave this debate between Jesus and the religious authorities, we need to look for a moment at where Jesus' parable touches our lives. We need to ask ourselves if we are the first son or the second. Are we those who have said no to God but have repented, accepted Christ and are at work in God's vineyard? Or are we those who have said yes to God but are not at work in God's vineyard? We are all sinners, the least of these, those who should have no place in God's kingdom, those whom Jesus willingly gave his life to redeem. We are those who have said no to God. It is our nature. We are fallen people. Yet in Christ we can now say yes, repent, and enter the kingdom of God. But those who enter are known by their obedience to God. Grace is how we receive Christ, but it is by obedience to Christ, to God, that we walk with Jesus and are known as those in the kingdom of God. The message in this parable is clear, God requires effective and obedient living from those in His kingdom. Jesus teaches that what matters, what is expected, is to actually do the will of the Father from the heart. If we are believers, then we are to be those who are doers. Are we obedient to Jesus Christ's command to us to love one another as he loves us? Belief and obedience cannot be separated for those who would be in the kingdom of God.

Another place this teaching crosses our lives is in the inclusion of tax collectors and prostitutes in the kingdom of heaven. The religious authorities were of the opinion that these were people to be despised because their sin separated them from God. They were lost. There was no animal sacrifice possible that could return them to God's favor. Their lives were so

unclean they could never be admitted into the temple or the kingdom of God. It is how we can let the Law, which is good, guide our hearts to a wrong response to those who are breaking the Law. Jesus has the greatest mercy and love for those who seem to be beyond redemption. Jesus came to show mercy. He is God's steadfast love in the flesh. His message to us is that no one is beyond the reach of God's steadfast love. We as Christians have to look at our hearts and be sure that we are not letting the righteousness that is given to us through Christ bring us to look down on others. Jesus sees the lost with compassion, love, mercy, hope, and grace, steadfast love that will bring him to lay down his life for others. We are to be his body right here, right now, until he comes again in power. We are to be those who love those who are cast out. I find this idea in myself. I tend to think of prostitutes as sinners who should not even be in Jerusalem. But they are there and Jesus sees them, loves them, forgives them, and dies for their sins that they may have abundant life. This is what it means to see with Jesus' eyes, to see those whose sin burden is so great that it is crushing the life out of them. We are not to look away in disgust, but to go to them and lift their burden. Jesus loves sinners. Jesus loves us. Jesus loves the least of these here in this place. We too are to be those known as those who love sinners and are willing to share with them the Good News of Jesus' love for them. There were tax collectors and prostitutes in Jerusalem, in the holy city, and they were going into the kingdom of God before the religious authorities because Jesus came for them, saw them, loved them, had mercy on them, and they received his love, repented, and went to work in the kingdom of God. They are the first son, the one who said no, changed his mind and went to the vineyard. Which son did the will of the Father? Which son are we?

*Pray with me: Jesus have mercy on us sinners redeemed by your blood shed on the cross. Come, Holy Spirit, and open our eyes to see those who are broken, hurting, filled with shame, and believing they are beyond redemption. Jesus, help us to be obedient to your commands. Holy Spirit, guide us to those who are the least in our community. Guide us to the sinners. Guide us to the undesirable that we may welcome them into the kingdom of God through our obedience to you. Change us to be those who are found joyously at work in your ripe harvest. Amen.*