

“Two Liars”
A Sermon by J. H. Reed
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Matthew 21:23-32

In today’s reading, yet again Jesus is at the center of a conflict. He was a conflict magnet. Jesus did not relish criticism though it came his way. And often, when criticized, he asked tough questions right back. I mean, he certainly could hold his own in an argument, and I think he took some sort of pride in the disputes and in silencing his opposition. Do not side-track me here with the fact that he never got married and it might have been quite different if he had! Jesus was comfortable with a legal wrangle, or at least energized by them.

In good Semitic legalese, he bombs his critics back with a question of his own. “I have just one question to ask you and if you answer it, I’ll answer your question about where my authority comes from. Tell me, who gave John the Baptizer the right to baptize? Was it God in heaven or merely some human beings?”

This stumped the authorities because if they answered, “from God,” Jesus would ask why they did not believe John, but if they answered from humans then the down-trodden would rise en masse. They were trapped in their own snare, so they just mumbled, “We don’t know.” So, Jesus declined to reply to their question, too. But he offered his parable to show them that although God had commanded all of his people to serve him, some had said they would and hadn’t, while some had said they wouldn’t—such as the lowly tax collectors and prostitutes—but *had* changed their minds and changed their lives. They *had reoriented their lives* away from former actions and toward God’s loving goodness and kingdom causes.

Jesus has just entered Jerusalem and begun his final week of life. Prior to this he has overturned the tables of the merchants in the temple's courtyard, chasing out sellers and buyers. In the Temple the lame and the blind had come to him for healing and he healed them, and once more the chief priests and teachers of the law were angry with his miracles. He must have been so exhausted by it all! The leaders were angered, too, when they heard the children shouting praises to the Son of David, so Jesus naturally quoted them Psalm 8, "Children and infants will sing praises."

After an overnight in Jerusalem and a trek outside the city he returns to the temple as the tireless teacher. Again, he is challenged by the temple leaders who asked him, "What right do you have to do what you do, to teach, and so forth? Who gave you the authority?" They were trying to trap him for blaspheming and fomenting revolution.

The Roman Empire rewarded useful religious leader agents nicely for maintaining the status quo by helping to thwart uprisings, and the sanctimonious religion leaders feared the common folk who were welcoming John the Baptist's teachings about new spiritual life through repentance. The times were uneasy, and Jesus was rocking the boat hard politically. It is quite evident in Matthew 21. He sided with the poor and he identified with folks whom both the Romans and the Jewish royalty discounted. And when criticised, Jesus often pointed out the hypocrisies that disgusted the crowds.

He sparred with the Pharisees and promised to answer their question if they would answer just one of his. They lost, and Jesus gave them a stinging parable which has been one of my most beloved parables.

He flings this at them: two youths were bidden to serve their father's will to go work. *Both* of them lied with their answers. The first told the father he wouldn't, but he later changed his mind and did. The second, however, said that he would go, but *did not* go. Jesus posed the question squarely in the context of what John the Baptist was commanding all to do: to repent and readily serve God. The boy's lies were irrelevant—what mattered was the outcome.

If I could choose for myself to fit almost any bit-part character in the New Testament I have often felt it would be that boy who smart-alecked his father saying he wasn't going to work in the vineyard, but then thought better of it and eventually went to work. As today, the 27th of September, is the 100th anniversary of my own father's birth, I am sobered to think of the lies I told him, too often the lie where I told him I would do what he asked, but failed. Other times I dodged the work at first, but then did it. I really do resist God's goodness, but I find I cannot live without it for very long. The shame that Jesus put on the other liar who answered dutifully that he would go serve the father but skips out is hard to bear, and I have certainly, certainly experienced *that shame*, blithely saying, "yes, sure, of course, I'll take care of that," and then procrastinate or let distractions interfere. That is a painful existence, indeed. The first son didn't want anyone to be his boss—but he changed his mind showing he would obey and work.

I don't think that the early Christians dwelled on the distinction the parable made between them and the Jewish authorities, for they must have quickly figured out that the danger of empty promises was as great for them as it was for the Pharisees. The same

with us. Like the early Christians we have little gain from shaking our heads in disgust about the bad people at the top in religious life, though there are many.

This is very important: Jesus didn't ask which son was approved, loved, etc. He just asked which one *did* what Dad ordered. His listeners, the Pharisees, correctly answered that the first one did, with no mention of the son's negative *attitude*.

Our Lord's brilliant cross examination question speaks to me as a biological older son in life. It speaks to me as a rebel, someone who often has a negative attitude. It speaks to me as someone who juggles many relationships, with other people and with God. It speaks to me as one who dislikes many aspects of all kinds of tasks, from gardening to Kingdom of God work. It speaks to me as one who dodges the truth about myself! It challenges me in ways that are simple and yet extremely redeeming. I just *love* this parable! How may it speak to you?

The fruit of the parable is clarity. As we mature, we observe that very few life matters are black and white, though many people hold such a world view. Complexity applies to a thousand questions and subjects. Nevertheless, I agree that Jesus did call for clear responses, and *not* just once for all, as some Christians preach, but over and over. We learn that it is unhelpful to glibly label people or situations with the words "good" and "bad." But we have to answer Jesus when he asks us which son attended to the order of the father to go work in the vineyard. That's easy to answer. The one who went to work had lied and said he wouldn't—but the important thing was, he did.

His question was easy to answer? It is easy to chirp up and say which son obeyed the father despite his lie. For me personally I can feel good if I act rebellious like a child

but eventually do what God commands, while if I breezily say, “Sure, I’ll do it” but never get around to it, or make excuses about why I don’t have to, I just don’t feel good about myself.

We may resist God’s difficult orders, but if we get around to going to work at what he tells us to do, we receive commendation. If we do it out of guilt, so what? We’ve done it. And there is a spiritual peace inside of us that grows and brings knowledge of God’s care and keeping.

I have to tell you about a character whose mind seemed to get changed at various times in the Old Testament. That would be God. God intended to dole out harsh punishment to two ancient cities, but repented, thought better of it, and decided not to destroy or punish. God repented that he had made Saul the King and had to re-engineer using flawed King David. God’s purposes were not changed by such decisions. God’s changeless nature was not polluted. Actual repentance was not frequent in the Old Testament, yet is tellingly used of God, himself, as I say. Usage of the Hebrew word “repent” is morally neutral—it really does mean simply to change one’s mind, to reverse a former action. And with that comes change of heart.

Repentance is active turning away from one thing and *toward* God. It is used of persons who had rebelled coming back to serve their king, faithless spouses returning to a marriage. What is at stake with repentance is much more than a mere change of mind. It is a reorientation, beginning with conscience work and God’s call, always the struggle over who is in control. Under whose authority will we live? True repentance does not simply mean we feel apologetic, or sad about our lives. Deep Old Testament religion shows that all we can offer to God is proven contrition through working on the requirements to do justice, love mercy, and live humbly. (Mic 6.6)

The sign of entry into the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus that we turn from our ways to follow God's ways shown by Jesus.

The opening words of Jesus' own ministry were "Repent and Believe," for there is always a profound connection between repentance and faith. Our encounters with Christ produce both repentance and faith in our hearts. And both are God's gifts, not our achievements. A dear colleague invokes that other, longer, more beloved and famous parable of two brothers, the one in Luke, and Debbie says that we Presbyterians must deal with our place as the older brother in that parable, our self-righteousness, our pride of achievement of social and religious status, especially those who have not known racial discrimination from birth. We good church people are not so much a younger brother returning broken by life, but are the proud, self-righteous older brother in need of reminders that his father gave to him.

I love this parable that shows God's use of liars, God's grace through service, calling us to love and serve God whether our attitude is positive or not. Our only integrity is in him who calls us by name, and claims us forever to love and serve him, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.