

Chapter 88: Doing the Will of the Father

Matthew 21:28–32

After Jesus turns the tables on the chief priests and elders in the previous passage (Matt. 21:23–27), he presses his point. Where they demanded Jesus’ credentials of authority, but were unable to answer Jesus’ question about John’s authority, Jesus now raises his own question: How have they responded to the authority of God? The religious leaders would promise obedience “right away,” but Jesus uses a parable to question whether they are truly obeying “all the way.” Here, Jesus shows that a promise of obedience is not enough, since *true faith includes knowledge, assent, and trust*.

Refusal and Repentance (Matt. 21:28–29)

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus regularly asks people what they think (Matt. 17:25; 18:12; 21:28a; 22:42; cf. 22:17; 26:66). Although sometimes Jesus asks this question to his disciples, here it appears that he is continuing to speak to the “chief priests and elders of the people” (Matt. 21:23)—that is, to the members of the Sanhedrin.¹ Thus, it is natural to read this parable as an extension of Jesus’ previous dialogue with these members of the Sanhedrin that moves the conversation forward. Previously, Jesus had exposed the limitations and illegitimacy of the authority that they attempted to wield against Jesus. Now, Jesus shows their unbelief and disobedience to God.²

In this parable, Jesus speaks of a man who had “two sons” (v. 28b)—or, literally, two “children” (τέκνα; *tekna*). Lenski points out that this word expresses a more tender relationship of a father to his sons than the word *son*, since *son* “points more to the legal relation involved, while τέκνον [*teknon*] points to affection as is so evident in I John 2:18; 3:7, 18; 4:4.”³ Thus, Jesus does not have in view legal obligations, but the filial piety and affection that a son should feel for his father. Therefore, when the father asks his son to go work in the vineyard, the son’s response should have been one of ready and willing obedience—“All the way, right away,” as we teach our children.

Shockingly, the first son says, “I will not” (v. 29a). In English, “I will not” may simply express what will (or, in this case, will *not*) happen in the future: “I am not going to do that.” Here, though, the Greek phrase “Οὐ θέλω” (*ou thelō*) addresses the *will* itself (i.e., the soul’s power for choosing what to do). To bring out the strong sense of this phrase, we might translate it as, “I don’t want to.” As Morris puts it, it is “an unqualified refusal.”⁴ While we recognize this answer as disrespectful even

¹ “This follows very naturally on the preceding paragraph, but Matthew gives no indication as to whether the parable was told immediately after the incident of the question about Jesus’ authority or on some other occasion.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 536.)

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 829.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 830.

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 537.

in our own context, we should recognize how much more disrespectful this would have been in the original context: “The reply of this first child comes as a shock; it is blunt, rude, without a trace of respect.”⁵ As Jesus will explain later, this first son represents the tax collectors and prostitutes (vv. 31–32). Thus, Jesus tells of this sin in order to (1) underscore the father’s tender love for the tax collectors and prostitutes, as they are represented by this *child*, and (2) the shocking sins of tax collectors and prostitutes in defiance of the moral law of God (vv. 31–32).⁶

Nevertheless, as shocking as this son’s is, he eventually “changed his mind and went” into the field to work, as his father had asked (v. 29b). Importantly, this word for “changing one’s mind” will appear later in v. 32 in a context where Jesus is asking why the religious leaders did not *repent* from their unbelief during John the Baptist’s ministry; however, Jesus sets up that confrontation by veiling the theological meaning of repentance and instead choosing a word that can mean repent, but also often means something more along the lines of “changing one’s mind” (2 Cor. 7:8; Heb. 7:21), as it is rightly translated here.⁷

Assent and Apostasy (Matt. 21:30)

The father then goes to the second son and “said the same” as he had to the first (v. 30a). In contrast with the first son, the second son gives a ready reply of assent to his father’s request: “I go, sir”; however, he does not follow through with what he promises (v. 30b). Literally, the son’s response does not include the verb “go,” but is much simpler: “I, lord” (Ἐγώ, κύριε; *Egō, kurie*). This is a shortened form of the phrase ἰδοὺ ἐγώ (*idou egō*; lit., “behold, I”) that appears throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) to express agreement or consent.⁸ This phrase translates the Hebrew הִנְנִי, which means “Here, I [am].”

While this phrase (“Here, I [am]”) is used in multiple ways in the Old Testament, it seems important to note in this context that it appears several times to express well-known responses to the Lord’s summoning of his people (Gen. 22:1, 11; 31:11; 46:2; Ex. 3:4; 1 Sam. 3:4, 5, 6, 8; Isa. 6:8). In particular, I wonder whether Jesus is intentionally echoing the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. When the Lord summons Abraham, Abraham response with “Here, I [am]” (Gen. 22:1). Then, Abraham uses the same response twice more in that passage: once, in response to Isaac’s addresses to his father, and another time when the angel of the Lord stops Abraham from killing his son (Gen. 22:7, 11). Furthermore, we have seen how Jesus’ language of “children” in this passage expresses the tender affection of this father for his two sons. Significantly, Genesis 22 appears directly after Abraham had to endure the pain of saying goodbye to his first son, Ishmael (Gen. 21:11). Furthermore, Abraham’s love for his second son (cf. “your only son”; Gen. 22:12, 16), Isaac, is mentioned or implied at several points in Genesis 22 (esp. Gen. 22:2). Although this is not a direct retelling of that story, the echo to the earlier story in the connection of two sons, the affection for the father for the son, and the ready responsiveness expressed in the language “Here I [am]” may suggest a clear contrast in Abraham’s obedience to the shortcomings of both of these sons in the parable here.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 830.

⁶ Thanks for Joe Váradí for these observations.

⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 537; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 803.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 613.

Unwilling Unbelief (Matt. 21:31–32)

At this point, Jesus carefully clarifies the point of his symbolism in this parable. He begins by asking a simple question: “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (v. 31a). The members of the Sanhedrin give the obvious answer: “The first” (v. 31b). Jesus does not need to acknowledge the accuracy of their answer. Instead, he assumes that point and jumps straight to the implications of their answer: “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you” (v. 31c). The chief priests and elders may see that the rebellious son who ultimately repented was better than the son who offered lip-service to his father without following through; however, they do not recognize that they are playing the part of the second son, while the tax collectors and prostitutes who come to the Lord are playing the role of the first son.

Instead of rebuking their failure to believe *him* (which would have been justified), Jesus instead points to their failure to believe John the Baptist: “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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him” (v. 32). Here, Jesus says “[did not] believe him” three times, which connects this parable back with the dilemma that the members of the Sanhedrin debated back in Matt. 21:25:⁹ “If we say [that John the Baptist’s authority was] ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’” Through that connection, we can see why Jesus challenges their unbelief about John: John was a prophet who identified Jesus as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Thus, by failing to believe John, they also failed to believe Jesus.

Yet, the point of contrast is not only in belief vs. unbelief, but also in the expressions of willingness to obey vs. unwillingness to obey. The greatest sinners outwardly flocked to John the Baptist, and then later to Jesus. That is, they initially refused to obey their Father in heaven, but then they “changed their mind” (i.e., *repented*) and turned to Jesus. Yet, the Sanhedrin who made regular, strong claims of willingness to obey the Lord did not believe the prophet whom the Lord sent. Thus, by the Sanhedrin’s own admission in v. 31, they acknowledge that they are *not* doing the will of the Father, while these tax collectors and prostitutes are. Still, Blomberg notes that Jesus’ language holds out an opportunity to repent: “‘Ahead of’ can mean *instead of* but may also mean *before*, leaving the parable deliberately open-ended. Though time is short, still the leaders have one last chance to change their ways.”¹⁰

As Morris writes, “This homely parable (found in Matthew only) brings out the importance of doing what is right and not merely talking about it.”¹¹ Mere *assent* to the truthfulness of Scripture is not enough; we must personally trust what the Lord speaks to us.¹² This is an especially important point in a confessional denomination, where we not only give a general affirmation to our trust in the Scriptures, but we even go so far as to define what we believe that the Scriptures actually teach, so that we cannot subtly shift our interpretation of Scripture in order to suit the changing culture. Nevertheless, Jesus’ parable poses an important question: Do we, like Abraham, respond, “Here I am”

⁹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 864.

¹⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 322.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 536.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:26.

and follow through with what we say that we believe? Or, do we give lip-service to the Scriptures and our Confession, and then disobey the Lord with our lives?

Discussion Questions

1. How does the description of this man's two "children" suggest something of the father's tender love for his sons (v. 28)? How should we react to the first son's blunt response to his father: "I will not" (v. 29a)? How does this response reflect the shocking scandal of the sins of the tax collectors and prostitutes? What does the eventual change of mind of the first son suggest about the hope of repentance for sinners (v. 29b)?
2. How does the second son's initial response differ from the first son's (v. 30a)? How does this response echo the prompt responses of faith and obedience among Old Testament saints? To what degree do you think that this passage echoes elements of Abraham's response to God when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22)? How does Abraham's faithful obedience contrast with the failure of the second son to follow through with his promise (v. 30b)?
3. When Jesus asks the chief priests and elders which son did the will of his father, what is their answer (v. 31a)? Do you think that they recognized the point that Jesus was making by this parable? Why or why not? How does Jesus compare the first son to the tax collectors and prostitutes? How does Jesus apply the second son to the chief priests and elders? How does the sin of pride blind us from seeing our sin?
4. When Jesus brings up John in v. 32, how does this help connect Jesus' point here to what he asked about the baptism of John in the previous passage (Matt. 21:25)? In other words, how is the authority of John connected with the repentance of the tax collectors and prostitutes, as well as with the unbelief of the chief priests and elders? Where are you unwilling to respond in repentance and faith to the Word of God?