

By Whose Authority

In Matthew 21:23-32 the Pharisees become angry with Jesus because they felt that He threatened their long-held authority. They feared Jesus' popularity, His ability to heal and perform miracles. In their eyes, Jesus was preaching heresy and leading people away from the religious traditions that defined the Jews. The Pharisees wanted to expose him as a fraud, and it was in this context that Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." The boy immediately said, "No" and later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "Yes" but he never got out to the vineyard. Then Jesus asked a simple question: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Then Jesus delivered the punch line, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him." I imagine Jesus heard some gasps and "How dare he!" from the crowd that day. Who does he think he is!!!! It was unthinkable to compare the righteous Pharisees to blatant sinners like the tax-collectors and prostitutes. Didn't he know that the Pharisees were too good to be lumped together with the likes of them? Didn't he know that only those people with the right "credentials," so to speak, would make it into the Kingdom of God? What was Jesus talking about and why was he excoriating the best people in town? There is an Old Japanese Legend that tells of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful, full of lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came to a room lined with shelves. On the shelves were stacked piles of human ears! A heavenly guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted on God's teachings. Their worship never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in Heaven. Jesus is dealing with a bunch of "Earless" religious folk in this passage, and it would be to our benefit to listen in on the conversation.

It's so easy to mistake self-righteous attitudes for true belief in Jesus as Savior. Any one of us can be guilty of it. This passage packs a powerful message because God's Grace is shocking. Jesus is showing a whole new view of God that breaks down the boundaries of everything they think to be true. Jesus is talking about what types of people are acceptable to stand before a holy, holy, holy God. And he passes over the religious professionals in favor of the worst of sinners. Has he lost his mind? Or could it be that our self-righteousness doesn't earn us many points with God? Maybe God isn't a Cosmic Scorekeeper, tallying up our moral hits and misses. Maybe we don't have to earn God's love. Because God loves us even when we fail. God's arms are open to everyone, from every race and nation and tribe and tongue, from every walk of life, from every circumstance. We're really missing something extraordinary when we put boundaries on God's grace. The Pharisees wanted perfection as a prerequisite to coming to God and they were good at putting on a show! Jesus knew that is not the way to bring hurting people into the kingdom of God. He did it with love and acceptance. He takes us and our brokenness and makes a blessedness. He did it by living out God's amazing, startling, absurd grace and Jesus expects us to live this way! We are to be grace-filled. We are to see beyond others' faults and care for their deepest needs, even if they are hostile to our love and grace. We are to value all people as worthy of acceptance, and we are to introduce them to the Jesus who died in their behalf, and in our behalf. No one is left out of God's grace, and no one is excluded from the Kingdom of God! Jesus said that the tax collectors and the prostitutes would enter the kingdom before they did. The tax collectors and the prostitutes didn't carry the baggage of religiosity. All they knew was that they were forgiven and washed clean. Jesus simply widened the boundaries of the kingdom. Of course, the Pharisees were part of it, but so were the people that the Pharisees would never accept as equals. The Pharisees wanted a kingdom that was reserved for themselves and their kind. Jesus wanted a kingdom that was big enough for everybody. I believe when we get to heaven there will be a few righteous souls. But these few righteous will be outnumbered by the billion times a trillion like me who have not been all they might have been, or should have been, but they've been healed by the wounds of their Master, Jesus who forgave their confessed sins and set them free! This greatness of God's grace is that salvation cannot be earned, it is a free gift of love offered to all who will accept it and fully surrender their eternal life to Jesus. Please do not be like the Pharisees let your perceived goodness get in the way of Jesus' righteousness. Don't let your sanctity overshadow Jesus' sacrifice. Believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior and claim your place in the Kingdom of God today. Do more than Say Yes like the second son and then do nothing, follow through and follow Jesus!