

Jesus Is Focused

Matthew 21:23-32

INTRODUCTION

Some of you will remember a popular sitcom that ran in the 1960s called "My Three Sons." It ran for 12 seasons and starred Fred MacMurray as a single dad raising three boys with the help of his Uncle Charley. Based on that show and such movies as "The Shaggy Dog" Fred MacMurray had the reputation of being the world's greatest dad despite getting his start by playing far more sinister roles.

Even if you are very familiar with that show, you may not know that in 1941 Fred bought 1750 acres of property in Northern California where, among other things, he planted a vineyard from which he made wine and sold under the MacMurray Ranch label, an enterprise his real-life daughter continues to run to this day.

The parable in today's gospel has nothing to do with Fred MacMurray, but it does tell the story of a really good dad who owned a vineyard. But the parable's dad only had two sons, not three.

The setting for the sequence of events in this 21st chapter of Matthew is the last week of Jesus' life. Chapter 21 opens with the Triumphal Entry (Palm Sunday). In Matthew's chronology, Jesus then goes into the Temple and drives all of the moneychangers and merchants out, proclaiming:

My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers. (Matthew 21:13)

And if that weren't bad enough for all the religious leaders milling about, while there in the Temple Jesus also had the audacity to heal blind people and lame people, all of which resulted in the children joyfully singing a phrase they had heard earlier in the day:

Hosanna to the Son of David! (Matthew 21:15)

That spontaneous songfest was the final straw for those religious leaders. In the matter of a few hours, this upstart carpenter's son had organized a victory parade, disrupted the temple's economic system, performed non-sanctioned miracles and had children proclaiming Him to be the Messiah. So quite naturally, these religious leaders told Jesus to:

Knock it off! (Matthew 21:16, Brodbeck translation)

I think Jesus just smiled as He reminded them what King David in Psalm 8:2:

From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise that that your enemies might be silenced ... (Psalm 8:2)

He doesn't quote the last part. But those religious knew how the verse ended. They got it, and they weren't happy.

Our text for today begins the very next morning, Monday morning, the day after Palm Sunday. The day after the tables were overturned and the blind started to see and the lame started to walk and those kids started to sing. Those religious leaders were waiting for Jesus to arrive that morning, determined that Monday would not be a repeat of Sunday.

So as soon as Jesus began to teach, they interrupted Him a question:

By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you that authority?
(Matthew 21:23)

Question #1: The Authority Question

There it is. It is one of the first questions to be asked in every conflict situation.

- Who told you that you could do that?
- Did you get permission first?
- Who put you in charge?
- Where did you get the authority to do that thing that you've been doing?

In man-made systems, authority will always be an issue because in man-made systems there is always a quest for power. People like to be in charge. More specifically, people don't like other people to be in charge. Thus the people who think they are in charge – whether they hold a position or not – have a set of parameters about how things should operate, and when something doesn't fit within their tight little model, they throw out the authority question.

Each spring break when I was in college I traveled with the drama team. We performed a religious play in churches and schools all week long, 14 performances in a span of 8 days. We were told to not touch anything, but in a little church in Coleta, IL a relatively new pastor decided on his own to move the furniture in the chancel out of the way so that we had more to perform. Six months later, he was fired. *Who gave you permission to move that furniture?*

When it comes to issues of the faith, the main problem with the authority question is that it takes the focus off the work of the Kingdom and puts them on the system. Jesus battled that throughout His entire ministry. The religious leaders of His day:

- Didn't like the fact that Jesus and His disciples ate grain straight from the field without doing the mandatory ceremonial washings.
- Didn't think His associations with outcasts and sinners were something a good Jew should be doing. How dare He let a prostitute wash His feet? If you knew what kind of woman that was ... they told Him.

These things were against the rules. You don't have the authority to tinker with our rules. Your job is to obey them!

Question #2: The Source of Authority Question

Rather than answer their question, Jesus responded with a question of His own. He understood what they were doing. He knew this was a power move on their part, and He wasn't going to play their little game. He posed a question of His own, one that took the subject to a much deeper level. He brought up the subject of John the Baptist's ministry and asked:

Where did (John's authority to baptize) come from? (Matthew 21:25)

"Let's not talk about authority," Jesus said, "Let's talk about the source of authority."

- Who gets to decide who has authority and who does not?
- Did the religious leaders have the authority to grant John authority to do what John did?
- Did they have the authority to tell Jesus He couldn't do what He already did?
- And what if the rules of the system interrupt the ability to do the ministry God puts in front of you? What takes precedence?
- Who gets to decide?

Now the answer to that question is, I think, pretty obvious, even for these religious leaders. They liked to think that their authority came from God. The reality is they set up a system that put them in charge. It wasn't God's system; it was a system created by their additional rules and regulations, a system that gave all the power to them.

Knowing they had been trapped by Jesus, they did the only thing they could possibly do in that situation. They refused to answer the question that Jesus posed.

We don't know. (Matthew 21:27a)

I think Jesus probably smiled again before responding:

Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Matthew 21:27b)

You won't answer my question, Jesus said, so I won't answer yours... but I will tell you a story.

There was a man who had two sons. Not three. Just two. No dog, No Uncle Charley. The man also owned a vineyard, and on this particular day he needed some extra muscle to help with the work. We don't know if it was harvest time and he needed help picking the grapes or if it was still the growing season and the vineyard needed weeding and pruning. Either way, this man thought "This is a perfect job for my two sons."

- Son #1 wasn't interested. "No thanks, dad. Can't help you out." But later he changed his mind and went to work.
- Son #2 agreed to work right away. "Sure, dad! Glad to help." But for whatever reason he never showed up.

So ... given those details, Jesus said, I have another question for you

Question #3: The Response to the Source of Authority Question

Which of those two sons, Jesus asked, made dad happy? Which one gave the proper response to his father?

- The one who said "No" but went to work anyway
- The one who said "Yes" but never did anything

The religious leaders answered correctly. The one who did what his father wanted done was the one who brought the most pleasure to his father. Not one the pretended to be obedient, but the one who ultimately was.

Now, the truth of the matter is that neither boy is a perfect role model. This biblical needed a third son – like Fred MacMurray – one who would say "Yes, I'll go" and who then immediately go and so what his father asked him to do. But we don't have a third son here. Just two.

The point Jesus was making to these religious leaders was simple. Unlike some of the parables Jesus told, the meaning of this one is pretty straightforward. It required no explanation.

- The vineyard owner (the father) is God
- The vineyard is the Kingdom of God – the work of faith that God calls His followers to do
- The work to be done is to help the Kingdom of God grow and flourish – to bear fruit for the Kingdom
- The two sons are anyone who claims to be part of God's family – those who hear the Word of God – the word of the father – who know what God wants to accomplish in this world

You religious leaders, Jesus said, you talk a good game. You sound like you are on board with what the Father wants to accomplish in this world, but in the end what you do doesn't make a difference in the Kingdom of God. You are more concerned with your system than you are with the fruit that is produced.

By contrast, Jesus said, there are all of these tax collectors and prostitutes – people who don't affirm your authority but who nonetheless do what God wants. Those are the people who bring a smile to the face of God. Those are the people who will enter the Kingdom of God while you are on the outside looking in.

Skip down to the end of the chapter, and you will read these words:

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him ... (Matthew 21:45-46a)

They didn't repent. They instead escalated the conflict.

Application

The goal of faith for all of us is to keep our eyes focused on the vineyard – on the ministry that God has called us to do. We need to hear the call of the Father and immediately get to work doing what He has asked us to do.

Don't get stopped by question #1. Let question #3 be the one that continually rings in your ears.

What is God calling you to do today? Let's commit ourselves today to being the "third" son, and let's focus on the vineyard.

Amen.