

²³When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For 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.”

Palm branches are waved by the crowds to greet Jesus as he arrives in Jerusalem, and immediately he enters the temple and overturns some money tables. Yet, he remains there in the temple, where he welcomes the blind and lame, healing them. The people who see all this cry out, “Hosanna to the son of David,” which is quite the claim to make of a vagrant man who just rode in on a donkey. The chief

priests witness all of these events, and they view Jesus with a critical eye, to say the least.

The next morning, Jesus enters the temple again, and that is where today's lesson picks up. He is approached by the chief priests, who ask by whose authority Jesus does all these things. There is an old Jewish joke where someone approaches a rabbi and asks, "Why do rabbis always answer a question with another question?" To which the rabbi replies, "Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?" Jesus must have heard that joke previously, because he side-steps the chief priests' question with his own question.

"I hear you, but before I answer, let's back up and talk about my predecessor John. Where did his authority come from? Answer that, and I'll tell you where mine comes from." Of course Jesus knew the answer. The authority for him and for John came from God. Neither of them were sanctioned by human authorities to do their ministry. Neither of them had received premier training with the most highly flaunted rabbis. If these two had any claim to authority, it had to come from God, and the last person in Israel to have that distinction was Moses. The chief priests of course didn't want to give John that level of credit. He had called them out for thumbing their noses at the common people and at the people on the fringes. John had publicly called them names and he said their places of honor meant nothing to God. So the idea of saying John's authority came from God wasn't a remote possibility for the chief priests. But a lot of the people thought John was from God, and they feared crossing the people. So the chief priests answered, "We don't know." Since they didn't live up to their end of the bargain, Jesus sure wasn't going to give them an answer either.

Yes, Jesus was a little saucy in this exchange, but he knew there was little use engaging with people who were so close-minded. They didn't pose their initial question out of an interest to learn, because they -- and Jesus -- knew that their opinions of Jesus were already concrete. Not satisfied with leaving it there, agreeing to disagree, Jesus takes them on a journey down parable lane. A father had two sons... just that detail gives us a lot of clues. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and Aaron, David and his brothers: these are some of the foundational stories of Israel, and they involve brothers not getting along. So we immediately know where this story is headed. The father has a vineyard... and that detail is supposed to remind us of the scores of verses in scripture that refer to Israel as God's vineyard. So Jesus isn't being as coy with the meaning of this parable as he is with so many other parables. The father asks one son to work in the vineyard, who says "No" but later does, and the other son responds to the same request by saying "Yes" but not doing it. Jesus then asks the chief priests which son they'd rather have. The answer is obviously the one who did the work.

The point of this exchange comes back to the question, "By whose authority does Jesus do his ministry?" And the parable points to the reality surrounding Jesus and the chief priests. Those on the margins of society -- the prostitutes, the disenfranchised, the diseased, and anyone else who by outward appearances had said "No" to God -- these people heard John's message to turn once again to God and they did it. The chief priests were called to shepherd all of Israel; they had said "Yes" to the father. They looked the part and they had said all the right things. But when they heard John's message to turn once again to God, they failed to show up.

John's proclamation in the wilderness was not the first time these religious authorities had failed to show up, however. Even though the outcasts appeared to have said "No" to God, they never were given a chance to actually say that. That's because no one had ever addressed them with an invitation. The religious authorities had said "Yes" to working in God's vineyard, and that vineyard work has always been about sharing the word of God's grace with all who need it. These leaders had failed to address the common people with a message of God's grace. Since they didn't live up to the task, John was sent to offer the kingdom's invitation to the lost and sorry souls. Later Jesus picked this up in his ministry, he proclaimed grace to the lost and the weary, and he was labeled a "sinner" for doing so.

Being called to work in the vineyard has always meant going beyond the boundaries of our comfort. This calling is to share a word of God's grace with those on the margins, with those whose cries for acknowledgement challenge and stretch us, with those who have different viewpoints, and with those we would otherwise never associate. God is eternally fond of all of the people in the vineyard, you and I among them, for no other reason than that is who God is. The truth is that whenever you and I say "Yes" to God, it is a "Yes" to the other people in the vineyard as well. God is loving, merciful, welcoming, and gracious, and God's vineyard cultivates those same attributes in all who enter it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.