

Walk The Walk

{based on Matthew 21:23-32}

An old country preacher used to say, "There are two parts of the Bible. The first part is believing it, and the second part is behaving it."

The Scripture reading this morning mirrors the attitude of many church leaders, from the pastor on down.

We all want to stand on our own authority - be it traditional, denominational or delineated by church by-laws.

As we read and study what's going on here, we may just see a reflection of ourselves.

In our reading, the priests, scribes and elders of the temple – (ahem! – pastor and church board) are uncomfortable with Jesus exercising authority that directs the people to change their religious practice in the temple.

The big issue is that Jesus has just cleansed the temple of money changers and practices that served man and not God.

If changes are to be made, let the authority of the church make the changes - again the Sanhedrin, priests and elders. That would be their standing. Besides, who has the audacity to question their authority? So, they set up some committee meetings and discussions as to how they should address this issue.

I would love to have been a fly on that wall, if for no other reason than to see a bunch of self-centered people with all kinds of personal agendas, coming to a *unanimous* agreement. Imagine that, they all appear to be on the same page! 'Let's back this Jesus into a corner, and when He cannot explain Himself and His authority, that will be His doom.'

It appears that they were all in agreement. So, they gathered around Jesus and asked Him, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"

Theologian David Lose states that authority is "given" to us by the **author**, or the one who holds the muscle to accomplish something. Sometimes, instead of authority being handed down from above, it gets 'handed UP' from people who submit themselves to another's authority.

And so, Jesus retorted that He would answer their question if they would answer His, "The baptism of John, where was it from...from heaven or from men?"

Well that just threw them into a frenzy. If they agreed it was from heaven, Jesus would then ask why they didn't believe John. If they said from men, they were afraid the multitudes would turn on them, because they all saw John as a prophet. That left them no choice but to say that *they did not know*.

To this, Jesus responded, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." Jesus knew exactly what He was doing in bringing the matter to a stalemate.

Certainly, the Sanhedrin could drive Jesus out and destroy His ministry, but there would be this lingering issue: Jesus offered redemption if they would only believe. Until they had a better handle on this salvation and eternal life stuff, they weren't ready to be hasty.

And so, Jesus continues on in His ministry for now, and tells them a parable: There was a man who had two sons. The father goes to his first son and tells him to go work in the vineyard. The first son refused, however he later changed his mind and agreed. The father tells the second son to work in the vineyard and he first said "Yes, I will work," but he did not do so.

Jesus asks, "Which of the two does the will of his father?" They said, "The first"...which was the correct answer. Now just why is Jesus sharing this parable with these church leaders?

When John the Baptist preached repentance and baptism, the great church leaders and the devoutly religious, followed him, and listened intently to what he taught. But they refused to humble themselves, they refused to repent of their sins, and they refused to be baptized. They wanted to know who this John was, and what he was all about, but that's as far as it went.

John continued preaching as one crying in the wilderness to the lost, encouraging them to repent of their sins, and to be baptized with water. Multitudes did exactly that!

Many may answer this parable in the same manner as the Pharisees.

The first son - based upon the fact that he said NO to his father, but then realized his duty and *did* follow through to tend the vineyard. The second son said 'YES', yet he did *not* follow through with the task at hand.

This is a great lesson for *us* too. Titles, degrees, and positions of leadership don't always mean that we are right.

They certainly don't mean that we ever get beyond the need to humble ourselves before the Lord and repent of our sins...daily! Starting the day with prayers, worship and confession, is somewhat akin to starting our day by brushing our teeth, taking a quick shower, and combing our hair. It does indeed help us face the day with a refreshing attitude and appearance.

Then, when we get off course, when we say YES to God but fail to follow through with our good intentions, when we sin whether by commission or omission, it helps to remember that there is another SON present in the passage – not the two boys, not their father, who was, himself a son, but Jesus, who told the parable. Here is another Son who is far different than us - He prayed to His Father, "Thy will be done," and not only meant it, but even more, did it.

That's where we could end our discussion on this Gospel passage, but there's more. As we respond to Jesus' obedience on the cross, we too are called to be obedient. What we believe about Jesus Christ must surely change the way we live our lives in the world. We are called to live and act like Jesus, to strive and match our actions with our words, to live in such a way that our faith expresses itself in faithful actions.

After the First World War, when Communism swept across Russia into Estonia, a hundred Christian leaders in the city of Dorpat were arrested and sentenced to death. They remembered that, on the last night of Jesus' earthly life, He instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The men asked Pastor Hahn, their spiritual leader, to conduct such a final service for them. Fearlessly, he went to the Russian commander and asked for permission to minister to the condemned men.

"If those people are crazy enough to want this, and if you are foolish enough to grant their request, we have no objection. But if you go into that prison, you can never come out again. You must suffer their fate."

The pastor ran home, where he fell on his knees in prayer, to ask what God expected him to do.

As he said farewell to his wife, she instinctively knew that this was a final goodbye. She begged him not to leave her. He freed himself from her frantic grasp, as gently as he could, and then, with the Spirit-led majesty of a martyr, went directly to the prison, administered Holy Communion to the hundred gathered there, and was shot down with them.

Our beliefs may never cause us to go to that extreme, but when we behave in such an obedient fashion, we will truly find our deepest purpose, our greatest joy, and the Peace of God that passes all understanding.

Our Lord Jesus set aside the glory of Heaven in order to become human, and humbled Himself to the point of death – even death on the cross.

This third SON, who tells this morning's parable, is the One to believe in, and in whose footsteps we must follow.

When we act on our belief in Him, when our faith and faithfulness are *one and the same*, then we, like our Lord Jesus Christ, will bring glory to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Then, we will be glad that we both talked the talk and walked the walk.

Let us pray:

Holy One, give us the courage to change our lives, that we may demonstrate both *love* and *purpose*, not only by our words, but more importantly, by our actions. AMEN