

## THE LATTER PARABLES OF JESUS

### Message 8

Scripture: Matthew 21:23-32

INTRO: Our messages have been on the latter parables of Jesus. In the first parable we looked at, Jesus told the disciples how they, the last of Jewish people in the Israeli theocracy before the Church age, would be the first in the kingdom. The last, Jesus said, would be first, and the first last. That parable covered some 2,000 years of Jewish history. God had chosen Israel to be His message bearers to the world. And, as I interpret this parable, because many were chosen, but so few chose to follow the Lord, the first would be last and the last first.

The disciples, however, understood now that Jesus would immediately set up that kingdom and they were already vying for positions in that kingdom. And so, Jesus gave a second parable in which He taught that the kingdom would not be set up now. He foretold in this parable that He would be rejected by His own, and He would be leaving for a considerable time. And in the time of absence, they were to be faithful with that which He would give them to do.

Then, after they arrived in Jerusalem, He had the Sabbath meal with Mary, Martha and Lazarus' neighbors and I believe He spent a quiet Sabbath there in Bethany. The next day was the day we know as Palm Sunday. According to Sir. Robert Anderson, this day was the last day of Daniel's 69 weeks. But what Jesus found at the temple was a full revelation that Israel was anything but ready to receive Him as Lord. They had made the Father's house, the temple, a house of merchandise.

Well, when that day came to a close, He went back to Bethany. And the next morning, when He was hungry He saw a fig tree on the way back to Jerusalem and it had leaves, and that was promising, since He was hungry. So He went to pick some figs only to find it did not have any figs. Earlier, in another parable, another fig tree was given the chance of one more year to bear fruit. If it did not, it was to be cut down. And now the evidence is that the fig tree would be unfruitful, and the evidence in the tree is that it will not grow fruit this year either, and so its time is up.

All of this I interpret to mean that God will now set the nation of Israel aside as His primary tool to get His message to the

world. History bears that interpretation out. The progression of Daniel's prophecy of 70 weeks came to a stand still after the fulfillment of 69 of those weeks. The 70<sup>th</sup> week, a week that was also related to Israel and Jerusalem (Dan. 9) would now have to wait.

So we come now to our fourth of the latter parables. It is the parable of the two sons.

#### D. The Two Sons (Matt. 21:28-32)

##### 1. The Parable (28-31a)

So, let us begin by reading this parable in Matthew 21:28-31 (read). In the parable the first son said He would not go to work in the vineyard. But afterward he regretted that decision, and he went. The second son said he would go, but afterward did not go. And after giving the parable Jesus asked this question: "Which of the two did the will of the father?" Well, the answer is obvious to them. Now, of course, we must ask, what is the meaning of this parable?

Now before we consider the setting of this parable, let us take note to whom this parable is addressed. The first three parables have been addressed to the disciples. The first two were on the way to Jerusalem. The third was the day after Palm Sunday, when they were going from Bethany to Jerusalem during the Passover time. The next three parables are now addressed to the Jewish leaders and people at the temple. It is just before the Passover, and Jerusalem is filled with thousands upon thousands of people. And Jesus is going to tell them where things are at with them, and He does it in parables.

In this first parable He addresses to them He has a very hard message to deliver to them. And like Nathan, who had a very hard message to deliver to David, Jesus delivers this message by way of a parable designed to trap them into discovering for themselves where they are. When Nathan had given his parable to David and had shown to him a very cruel man and David gave judgment concerning that man, Nathan said, "You are the man." That is what Jesus will do here.

##### 2. The setting

Well, once more we go to the setting. On the day we know as Palm Sunday, when Jesus arrived at the temple, He drove out all those who bought and sold there and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves and He said, "It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves!" (21:12-13).

In Mark 11:12-19, we find that the next morning, as He is on His way to the temple again, that He cursed the fig tree. That same day, when He got to the temple, He found them all set up to do business again and so once more Jesus cleansed the temple. You can well imagine that by this time the Jews have almost had enough of this man who claims to be the Son of God.

Now we go back to Matthew 21 to pick up the story (read 23-27). Now it is interesting that the chief priests and elders of the people don't take a bold stand and just let Jesus have it. He has cleansed the temple of that which they have allowed for years. How dare this man do this? Nobody dares to do something like this to them? Does He now know who they are? What authority does He have anyway? That which they have allowed to be done in the temple, He has openly and boldly condemned. He overturned tables with money and chairs. There was something authoritative about Him. And they are angry, yet something cautious them. He seems to have authority, but where is He getting it? So they said to Jesus, "By what authority are You doing these things? Who gave You this authority?"

So He said, "Let me ask you a question. If you answer Me, I will answer you. Here is my question for you: The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from man?" Now notice that as they consider how to answer Jesus, they are not interested in truth. They are interested in accomplishing their goals regardless of what the truth is. So, after Jesus' question, they went aside and reasoned among themselves how they might answer Him. They could figure out what would happen no matter what they said. They reasoned thus, "If we say that his baptism was from heaven, He will say, 'Why didn't you believe him?' If we say it was from men, the people will turn on us because they view him as a prophet.'" So they said, "We do not know." They did know, at least

from their opinion. But to answer truthfully would have gotten them in trouble. And so, since they could not answer without getting into trouble, Jesus said, "Well then, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." It is then that Jesus gives the parable of the two sons that we just read.

### 3. The Interpretation

So we go to the interpretation of this parable. Jesus has brought up the matter of John's baptism for a purpose. He has a message for them, and it is because they failed to believe John that He needs to give them this message. It is a message no less dangerous to deliver than the one Nathan had for David.

And so Jesus gave this parable. By way of this parable, He will give them a message they might not have been able to refrain from apprehending Him right there. So He told this story. There was a man who had two sons, and he came to the first son and said, "Son, go, work today in my vineyard." But the son said, "I won't." But later, when this son thought things over, he regretted his decision, and went and did as he had been told. Then the father came to the second son and asked him to work in his vineyard. And he said, "I go sir," but he did not go. Then Jesus asked these Jews, "Which of those two sons did the will of their father?" Well, they answered correctly, and the answer seemed harmless enough. And so they answered Him, and did not know they had walked right into the trap.

Once again, the vineyard, I believe, pictures Israel. I mentioned that in an earlier parable and next message we want to take a look at that. Israel was God's vineyard. The father, in the parable, I think, represents God. God wanted Israel to do His work.

To understand whom the sons represent look at verses 31-32 (read). From these verses we can gather that the people He is addressing are those who heard John the Baptist's preaching. That is only about 2 years ago. And from these verses we can gather that the one son pictures the tax collectors and harlots of that day because this took place when John the Baptist was preaching. The second son pictures the religious people

and leaders of that day, the very people Jesus is talking to.

So, among the Jews, God's chosen people, are two classes of people, pictured as two sons. There are the tax collectors and the harlots, representing the openly rebellious and sinful people. And then there are the religious people, who are also sinful, but not openly so. As a matter of fact, outwardly they appear to be righteous, according to Matthew 23. But, they think themselves to be the spiritual, the godly people. Both of these groups are Jewish and both exist right there. Both groups heard John preach.

Now, you see, the message Jesus had for these Jewish leaders who had questioned His authority, was so severe they might have tried to kill Him on the spot. That might well be why He used this parable in which they have now trapped themselves. They had said earlier they did not know where the baptism of John was from. If they now changed their mind and said John's baptism was not from God, they would be in trouble with the people, and there were many people present there. Now He is telling them that the tax collectors and harlots are entering the kingdom of God before they are, and that is a message, no doubt, that was very hard to bear.

Notice now, what Jesus did. In verse 28 Jesus said, "What do you think?" And then He gave them the story of the two sons. And when He finished He asked, "What do you think? Which of the two sons did the will of God?" And they answered Him correctly, but if their answer is correct, then according to the parable, they represent the son who did not do the will of God! What a trap to be caught in! Like David, they had discovered they were the man. They had been asked to think, and they could think this through.

So they answered and said to Him, "The first son did the will of the father." They had answered correctly. And with this answer, everything is now ready for Jesus to make the application of this parable to them. So we go to the application in 31b-32.

4. The Application (31b-32)

The application begins in 31b (read). Let me ask you, do you know what kind of a message that was to these religious leaders? You could hardly have given them anything that would have been as disturbing as that! This is unthinkable! "Tax collectors? Harlots? And they are entering the kingdom before us? We are not in the kingdom? Unthinkable! What nerve has this man?"

But Jesus is not done. He said, "For John came in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him!" Earlier, when Jesus asked if the baptism of John was from men or from God, they should have said, "The baptism of John was from men." Jesus knew that if they had believed it was from God, they would have believed John and would have repented along with the tax collectors and harlots. But Jesus points out now that, in fact, John's baptism was from God. Here is how He did that. He said John had come in the way of righteousness. John preached right and lived right! He came in the way of righteousness.

Now to bring about righteousness was the very reason Christ was born. Righteousness should be one of the outstanding marks of every Christian. Christ died to make us righteous. The angel told Joseph to call the Son who was to be born of Mary, "Jesus". And the name Jesus means 'Jehovah saves.' And the angel said He was to be called this because, "He will save His people from their sins."

Now let me say this: right living is a dangerous way to live, both in the religious world and the non-religious world. Maybe it is most dangerous in the religious world. The prophets of the OT were killed because of it, and that, by their own people. John the Baptist was killed because of it. Jesus was killed because of it. One of our folk said something like this recently, "If Jesus came to our town He would be in trouble here too." Somebody told a relative of ours, "We Christians should all just love like Jesus loved, and everything would be all right." And this relative said, "And they crucified Jesus." Righteousness is a dangerous way to live.

Well, Jesus said John came in the way of righteousness, and then, still speaking to these religious leaders, He

said, "...and you did not believe Him." And they had answered correctly to Jesus' question from the parable that the first son did the will of his father and the second son, who said he would go but didn't go didn't do his father's will. That also made them the second son. They said they would work in the vineyard, but they did not, and the proof is that they did not believe John the Baptist's message.

Now notice something important in the latter part of verse 32. Jesus said, "...you did not believe him, but tax collectors and harlots believed him, and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him." Notice first Jesus said, "...when you saw it..." When they saw what? When they saw the repentance of the tax collectors and harlots! When they saw that, it should have done something to them.

We need to ask a very important question right here. How did the tax collectors and harlots get into the kingdom? And how was it that these religious leaders were not in nor were going in? The key is repentance! Here is this great message of repentance! Here is how Israel missed out on the kingdom!

Go back to the parable in verse 29 (Read). It says the first son *regretted* his decision not to obey. He had said he would not go, now he *regretted* it. Now this son represented the tax collectors and harlots. And this word *regret* represents repentance. It is the word, *metamellomai* and represents *metanoia*, repentance. That is what happened in John's baptism, they repented.

Then look at verse 32 (read). Here are the religious leaders represented by the second son who said he would go but did not go. And Jesus says here, "You did not afterward relent." The word *relent* is the word *metalmellomai*, as in verse 29. And again, no doubt, it represents repentance. That is what John's baptism was all about. And these religious leaders did not repent.

We are asking, how did the tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of heaven? Well, the words 'regret' and 'relent' in the parable speak of repentance, which is what John preached. So, we must go to John to see just what his message was. What we learn in this parable is most significant. You see, John came in the

way of righteousness. And we ask, just what was this way of righteousness? Jesus said that the tax collectors and harlots entered the kingdom because they believed the preaching of John the Baptist. And I ask, what did John preach? It is important here, because these Jewish leaders are told that they did not enter the kingdom because they failed to believe John and the tax collectors and harlots were going in.

Well, to see what John preached, let us go to Matthew 3, where we get some idea of what John preached (read 1-2). The very first thing he preached was repentance. Oh, here is a most painful but wonderful word. I have told you many times about this word. It is the word *metanoia*. It is that which I believe is pictured by the words of the parable translated regret or relent in our text. *Metanoia*, repentance, means a change of mind. The word 'meta' means change. But the last part of this word speaks of that part of the mind where all the data of one's life is stored. There is a lot of material there that needs changing!

Now, part of the pain of repentance is that this change of mind must bring about a change of action, a change of life. That is painful. And what adds to the pain of repentance is that the change is a change from sin to righteousness. That cuts across every aspect of our pride. But there is something else that accompanies repentance that is the most painful part of repentance of all. If there is true repentance, this most painful part must accompany it. Listen to it in Mark 1:5, "Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him (i.e., John the Baptist) and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins." They came to John in repentance and that caused them to confess their sins! Now I'll tell you, that is absolutely the hardest thing in the world! Matthew 3:6 says, "and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins." Try confessing to your life partner when you've done wrong. It is much harder than spending a lot of money and taking her out to supper. Children, try confessing your sins to your parents. It is much harder than being nice for a few days.

Earlier we took note of something important in the latter part of verse 32. Jesus said, "...you did not believe him, but tax collectors and harlots believed



him, and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him." Jesus said, "...when you saw..." or, "...when you saw it..." When they saw what? When they saw the repentance of the tax collectors and harlots! When they saw that, it should have broken them.

Repentance brings about a change of action, which starts by confession. You see, Jesus could have pointed to His disciple Matthew who was right there. He was once a tax collector, but look at him now! We could go through examples of tax collectors and harlots who were changed by the preaching of repentance and righteousness.

What happened to people who truly repented and confessed their sins? Jesus could have pointed to the tax collector Matthew. He could have pointed to just a few days before our text and pointed to Zacchaeus. We see this change of action most clearly in Zacchaeus. The religious leaders had seen that when the tax collectors got right with God they got right with man too. They changed their ways. They lived right after they got right. Harlots repented. They had seen that too. They stopped living in sin and got right.

It was not John's baptism that made these people change. It was repentance and confession. The religious leaders thought it was baptism, so they wanted to get baptized too. But John would have none of it. He knew by their confession that nothing had changed in them. But these tax collectors and harlots, they had experienced change!

Take for example Zacchaeus. When Jesus came to Jericho, this little man wanted to see Jesus. He was ripe for salvation. And Jesus said to this little guy up in the tree, "Zacheus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." And when he was there Zachaeus told him, "I am going to give half my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything by false accusation, I will restore fourfold." There is the pain of this word repentance. And Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house because he also is a son of Abraham; for the son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost." It is much easier to get

tax collectors and harlots to recognize they are sinful and lost, than religious people.

Now Zachaeus was a tax collector. And when Zachaeus repented, he gave half his goods to the poor. And I think it was not that he had suddenly become very generous. I think it is because he remembers that he has gained a lot of wealth by taking what did not rightfully belong to him, and he wants to make that right. I think he might have said something like this, "Look Lord, I have taken so much from people I have no idea where it all belongs and so to make sure I cover all that I have unrightfully taken I am giving half my goods to the poor! And furthermore, I also have taken things from others by false accusation, and I remember those accounts, and to those I will restore fourfold." That is repentance, and that is confession! No wonder then that Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house."

Now you may be saying, "Aren't you reading a lot into that text?" In the Greek of the NT there are four classes of 'if' clauses. I won't bore you with all four, but the class used here is what is known as a first class condition. And a first class condition is what is called the class of reality. This passage could be legitimately translated like this, "And since I have taken things by false accusation, I will restore him fourfold." There is confession. Confession, oh, there is the hardest thing of all!

Let me say something here. There are some honest people who do not get baptized or join a church because there are things they know they need to confess, and they can't bring themselves to do it. Nobody knows why they don't commit. But they are honest enough to know they ought not to get baptized until they clean up and have a clear confession, but they are not convicted enough about their sin to clean up. Then let me say this, there are also many who are not that honest and they get baptized without cleaning up. I have no doubt that is so.

Now, you see, tax collectors and harlots have some very hard things to confess! There are many people who have some very hard things to confess. There may be many people who claim to be Christians who are in that

devastating class I spoke of a while ago. They think they are in, but they are not. They never repented! They never confessed those things that needed confession. I know of nothing harder than confession! but I also know of nothing that brings greater peace than repentance and confession!

Let us take an example of a harlot. Turn to Luke 7 (read 36-38). Now, what did this Pharisee do? Look at verse 39 (read). Here is a harlot who has repented, and her sins have been forgiven and she cannot express her gratitude enough. She brings that thing that was of greatest value to a woman, perfume. She is giving her best to One she is grateful to beyond words. Now look at verse 47 (read). She loved so much because she was forgiven so much. Now look at verse 48 (read). The verb here is a perfect tense. Jesus said, "Your sins have been forgiven once for all. You don't need to come with more perfume!"

Look at another account of a harlot Mark 14 (3-9). This event took place just a few days prior to our text, the evening before Palm Sunday when they had this large, community Sabbath meal in Bethany. This woman used a year's worth of wages in perfume. Why? Repentance and forgiveness brought out this kind of gratitude!

And do you know what Jesus is saying in our text in verse 32? You religious leaders saw the repentance of tax collectors and harlots, and you did not afterward relent and believe John! This should have spoken to your hearts, but you were so cold and so far away and so proud, that now, these tax collectors and harlots are entering the kingdom of God, and you are not. And so, I must tell you a few other things, and He will do that in the next two parables.

So let me draw an application from all of this:

**John the Baptist came in the way of righteousness and the kingdom lay there before you, the religious leaders. If you had been righteous, it would have been yours. If you at least had repented, it would have been yours, for John was a preacher of righteousness. Like the first son in the parable, the tax collectors and harlots, who said they were not going to work in the**

**vineyard, afterward repented at the preaching of John and they entered and are still entering the kingdom. But you, who said you would work in the vineyard did not do what you said you would, nor did you change your mind when John preached to you and you saw the righteous fruits of his preaching. You are outside the kingdom, and listen, I am not done with you. I have another parable for you.** And Lord willing, we'll look at that next time.

CONCL: Well, we conclude. Our first parable covered 12 hours of Israel's opportunity, and many were called. But during those 12 hours of their work day, few were chosen because few chose to follow the Lord. And now, those of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour became the first in the kingdom, so the last were first and the first last. The second parable now instructed those of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour that the millennial kingdom would not be set up immediately. The Lord was leaving for some time, and while He will be gone, they are to be faithful with the work He will give them to do. The third parable, the parable of the fig tree, was now used to show the disciples that Israel's day of opportunity was over. The tree was cursed and withered, and it would remain withered until the end of this age.

And now, Jesus has begun to talk to the Jewish leaders, and in parable form He is showing them where they are. In this first parable He has shown them that because they failed to believe John the Baptist, they are like the son who said, "I go", but he did not go. And now, for two years tax collectors and harlots have been entering the kingdom, and they are not. It is the beginning of what He has to show them.

And let me finish with this. We are at present in Matthew 21. Most of Matthew 21, 22, and 23 are devoted to Jesus' concerns over the religious leaders. And a verse comes to mind that will happen on this very day. Jesus had just given these religious leaders the most scathing denunciation you will read anywhere in all 66 books of the Bible in Matthew 23. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'" (Matt. 23:37-39).