

Scripture:

Matthew 21:23-32

“Following through.”

In Matthew chapter 7 --- verse 21 Jesus says ----- “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

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In other words ----- Jesus is saying ---- to simply declare your allegiance to me without also following through on what that declaration means ---- namely --- doing as God so leads and calls you ---- means very little.

As many of us no doubt agree ----- it is only when we follow through on what we say and what we think ----- that we demonstrate any kind of authentic conviction to it.

Anybody can say they agree with something or are convinced of it ----- but unless they act on it and follow through on it ----- it matters very little what they say or believe.

In the first part of our passage from Matthew’s gospel today the chief priests and the elders aren’t sure what to make of Jesus ----- and by whose authority He is doing what He is doing?

Verse 24 ----- ““By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. And who gave you this authority.”

And of course there are at least a couple of possibilities as to why they ask this.

One ---- do they already know the answer but are afraid to face up to it.

Or two ---- perhaps they truly don’t have any idea and inquire honestly.

The truth is whatever the reason they ask Jesus ----- there is a certain amount of laziness ----- and taking the easy way out on their behalf.

Anyway you look at it ----- they are failing to follow through on the situation.

Consider the following possibilities:

If they already actually know where Jesus' authority comes from ---- and are simply afraid to face the reality of His authority they are cowards.

If they figure His authority is merely of human origin they would essentially be calling all the people who have responded to John the Baptist who had the same divine authority ---- foolish ----- which would of course put them in a place of disfavour.

On the other hand if they the claim that Jesus' authority is in fact divine they will also make themselves look like fools --- fools for be pitting themselves against God ----- for never having submitted to or followed Christ's or John's lead.

Either way ---- no matter what they say ----- they'll be in hot water and turn many many people against them.

And if on the other hand they don't actually know and are being totally honest when they say --- "We don't know" ----- they are in no better place.

Part of the job of the chief priests was to be able to distinguish between false prophets and true prophets --- wandering fools and traveling wise men.

If they say they don't know about Jesus --- that they are unable to determine whether He is a true or a false prophet what they are in essence saying is that they are no longer able to fulfill one of their duties as chief priests ---- which would be seen as shameful and humiliating.

So they say nothing --- lazy and cowardly ----- they don't follow through on that which they are called to do.

But Jesus isn't willing to let them off the hook too easily ----- and puts their question right back to them ----- inviting them to think harder and be more forthright about what they think and where they stand.

So He responds to their question with another question.

The answer to which of course ----- is also an answer to their initial question.

Jesus has them answer their own question ----- by posing another question.

And I can't help but think here of the story about the Jewish man who goes to his rabbi one day and says ----- "Can I you tell me something?"

To which the rabbi nods.

And the man then asks ---- "Why is that rabbis always answer a question with another question?"

To which the rabbi responds ---- "Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?"

"Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?"

This is exactly what Jesus does.

He answers their question with another question --- driving them to think and reflect further --- inviting them to follow through on the matter.

And so now we come to the second part of our passage ----- verse 28-32 ---- where Jesus responds to their question with another question ---- asking in verse 28 --- "What do you think?"

"What do you think?"

And He basically goes on to tell the story of one son who when asked by his father to go work in the vineyard says "No" --- but soon changes his mind and goes off to work.

And then there is the second son who first says "Yes" --- when asked by his father to work ---- but never actually follows through on this --- and ---- in the end ---- doesn't ever get to work.

And after telling the story Jesus asks --- in verse 31 ----- "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

And of course the chief priests and elders respond with ----- “The first.”

The first --- the one who may not have actually said the right thing but eventually had a change of heart and acted on it.

And Jesus goes on ---- in the last few verses ---- to say that those who have a similar kind of change of heart ---- those who actually think about what is asked of them and follow through on it and come to a conclusion in their hearts and then act on it --- will enter the kingdom of God first.

Indeed He says that which would have been repugnant to the chief priests and elders ---- picking it up mid way through verse 31 ----- “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

In other words ---- “The lowest of the low --- the thieves and common criminals ----- the lowest and dirtiest and most despised members of society actually already get it --- and understand me and my authority ----- whereas you don’t yet.”

“They --- the lowest of the low ----- the despised in society ----- the tax collectors and prostitutes have listened to what John was speaking about --- and they have understood it despite their lack of education and status ---- and yet you who have such great privilege still fail to see and understand.”

When Jesus says ---- “Truly I tell you, 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.” --- the chief priests and elders were no doubt infuriated.

Jesus is calling them to accountability and saying stop lazing around ---- get on with it ----- make up your minds ---- take a stand.

Eventually we all have to take a stand ----- respond favourably --- and believe and turn our lives around in Christ --- or not.

We can't sit on the fence--- forever ---- saying "I'm not sure" ---- or -----"I don't know" --- as the chief priests and elders did in Matthew's gospel today.

It matters less what we have done in the past ----- been thieves like the tax collectors --- or engaged in behaviour that damages our souls and our spirits like the prostitutes and so many others.

Instead ---- it matters more that we are able to turn away from --- repent and believe in a new way --- a Christ inspired and God directed way.

Thankfully ----- in Christ we are not held to ---- or held back by what we once believed or how we once acted.

We are called to new beliefs and new ways of living in Christ.

And thanks to Christ ----- the healing saving reality of these new convictions ---- beliefs and actions are such that the past is washed away and forgiven.

The chief priests and the elders have been confronted with the reality of Jesus Christ and they don't know what to do--- at least not yet.

So Jesus tells the story of 2 sons who didn't really know what to do at first either.

They both say one thing and do the exact opposite --- which tells us that initially ---- when first asked the question they don't really know what to do ----- so they just say something to get out of the situation.

But after thinking about it a bit they both end up doing exactly the opposite of what they said they would do.

They both eventually decide how to respond to the question and the demand put upon them.

They couldn't remain indifferent forever ----- at some point they had to decide to either go and work ----- or not go and work.

And if they didn't decide ----- eventually time would have for them.

So it is with Christ and our faith.

So it is with what we think about --- by whose authority ---- Jesus does what He does.

We can say and think whatever we want but eventually we have to make a decision that leads to action --- just as the two sons did.

Unfortunately for the chief priests and elders ---- they still only see authority defined in worldly terms --- in terms of political and social structures.

And they want Jesus to weigh in on exactly where He fits into these political and social structures.

But the very question distorts Jesus' authority in the very asking.

Precisely because His authority is a complete paradox.

His authority doesn't involve the exercise of power ---- but the very renunciation of power.

Jesus is not a rival to Caesar or Rome --- or any other governor or government.

He's not a rival of the religious authorities ---- whether they be chief priests --- Sadducees ----- Pharisees ----- Essenes ---- Zealots ---- Scribes ----- elders --- or the Sanhedrin.

He's not a rival of anything like this.

And he's not a rival of anything like this ---- precisely because that would suggest that He is in the same league or category as they are.

Jesus is a whole new paradigm for understanding authority.

He is in a league of His own without any rivals or peers.

He is a whole new reality --- or more precisely put --- He is a return to THE reality --- as God so intends it.

God in Christ --- along with the Holy Spirit of God ----- is not about some kind of Patriarch like Caesar ----- or any other kind of secular governing authority ----- at any time in any place that rules by coercion.

The triune God of Father ----- Son --- Jesus Christ ---- and Holy Spirit is a community --- a relationship ---- a living breathing ----- reconciling --- redeeming --- saving ---- self-emptying love whose “authority” ---- is all about giving itself away in saving ----- life giving ---- love.

And all who believe.

All who see ourselves as created in the image of this awe inspiring relationship and community of love ----- that is God the Father ----- Son --- and Holy Spirit become so swept up and convicted that we give over to this upside down authority.

This --- first will be last and last will be first ---- kingdom of God --- that Jesus speaks about in Matthew’s gospel today.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

To be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ requires follow through.

To be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ means we must act on what we believe ---- we must act out what we believe.

Yes it can begin with confession of faith ---- the declaration of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

But eventually we must also come to an understanding of some of the things confessing Him as Lord and Saviour actually require of us.

The son who simply said yes and did nothing didn’t do as his father wanted.

The son who actually did something ----- went to work in the vineyard ----- is the one who --- despite having initially said no ---- ends up doing as his father asked.

We too are called to work in God’s vineyard ----- for the kingdom of God.

There is very little point in claiming Jesus as Lord if we don't also act on the demands and responsibilities ----- the calling ---- this places on us and invites us to live out and share.

As the great father of Reformed theology John Calvin said --- "There are social implications to the gospel."

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There **ARE** social implications to the gospel ----- we have to act out --- live out the gospel in the society and communities in which we live.

The gospel of Jesus Christ isn't just a gospel of the tongue ----- it is also a gospel of hands and feet and arms and legs and our whole bodies.

And so ----- may we make it so.

May we confess Jesus as Lord.

May we come to know that His authority is from God ----- rests in the reality of God the Father --- Son --- and Holy Spirit.

And may we enter into that loving saving relationship that is the community of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit ---- and live out our faith in tangible ways.

Feeding those who hunger.

Clothing those in need.

Nurturing those that are fragile.

Comforting those who grieve.

Sharing the saving love of Christ in word and in deed.

Inviting all to know Christ and His saving ----- reconciling love.

Follow through.

And ----- Bring it --- as our video earlier said.

Follow through on Christ and in Christ.

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for today includes that in believing and confessing Him as Lord ----- we are also called to -----

Be the transforming ----- loving ----- saving ----- grace filled presence of Jesus Christ as much as is humanly possible.

That all might come to know Him.

That all might be found in Him.

That all might come alive in Him.

That all might follow through --- on all that He calls us to do and be.

God has blessed us with so very much ---- and part of what He wants us to do is be generous and turn and share this abundance with others.

Following through on the reality of Jesus Christ in word and in deed.

Amen.