

# Who Says?

Matthew 21:23-32

Dr. Rick C. Dye

When he 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?" Jesus 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. Did 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?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So 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.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which 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. For 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.

\*\*\*\*\*

As a child of the 60's and 70's I can resonate with the response, "Who says?" After all, we were the generation that was urged to question authority and not to trust anyone over 30 years of age. Timothy Leary is given credit for the idea of questioning authority, although Benjamin Franklin said something very similar.

We are now a society that does not blindly accept the authority of others. I can remember preaching sermons and all you needed to do was quote Billy Graham to drive the point home. If you really wanted to close the argument, just quote J. Edgar Hoover! Those days are long gone.

Today, we want to know about the authority of those who speak. Merely holding an office or title isn't enough. Words have become cheap and all too common.

We expect action. We have all probably been in countless meetings devoted to talking about some issue, but never really getting around to doing anything about the situation. It is an all too familiar description of the church today. We talk the talk, but we never get around to walking the walk. The chief priests and elders were masters of this art. They could spend hours talking about the nuances of the law, but never put any of it into practice.

Jesus knew the game and he was nobody's fool! A few years ago, Dr. Phil was being interviewed on TV. He was asked, "If you could interview anyone in the world, past or present,

who would it be?” Dr. Phil replied, without hesitation, “Jesus Christ. I would like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life.”

I have my doubts about the wisdom of such an interview. I think Jesus would confront Dr. Phil and turn the tables on him, faster than he could blink. He would confound all of his questions and probably end up telling him to sell everything he owns, give the money to the poor and come, follow him. No, Dr. Phil, you do not really want to interview Jesus and I don't want to either. It would not go well.”

I would say the same thing about an encounter with John Wesley!

The chief priests and the elders in this Sunday lectionary reading discover that conversations with Jesus can be dangerous. They were attempting to play the “one-upmanship” game with Jesus. You know the routine. “Now tell me which schools you graduated from and what are your credentials?”

Many people today think they have religion all figured out. They are in control. Karl Marx said that religion is the opiate of the people. Today we are a bit more refined, calling it a cultural norm. We think we are interviewing Jesus and he is interviewing us!

Have you ever known big talkers? You know the type: whatever accomplishment you've just enjoyed, theirs was better; whatever operation you just had, theirs was much worse; whatever your summer vacation was like, theirs was even better! But you will notice with big talkers that when it comes time to get something done, they are usually nowhere to be found.

The New Testament leaves no doubt that discipleship is a matter of actions, not simply words. In our text, Jesus is confronting the religious establishment, a group that made its living on words. The men want to entangle Jesus in a debate that will compromise him, but Jesus makes it plain that he isn't interested in meaningless talk—he is concerned with meaningful action.

Jesus refuses to fall into their verbal trap. But he doesn't stop there! Jesus turns the tables and put the chief priests and elders on the spot with the parable of the two sons.

### **I. God Does Not Honor Those Who Talk Religion but Fail to Respond to God's Call**

Jesus doesn't appreciate word games! We are living in a time when our politicians and corporations are playing word games. When a when a multi-billion dollar industry appears before congress, after making the highest profits on record, and says that if they lose their five billion dollar subsidy, they will no longer be profitable, they are playing a word game.

Our politicians are masters of parsing words in give the impression of telling the truth, but hide the real consequences; they are playing a word game.

The religious leaders of Jesus' time were masters of the game. They didn't want any real changes to occur. The status quo was their source of support; so long as they didn't antagonize the Roman rulers, they pretty much were allowed to run the show in the religious realm. An

itinerant preacher like Jesus—particularly one the people were beginning to think might be the Messiah—well, such a person complicated their lives and threatened the status quo. That was why, as the week in Jerusalem went on, the religious leaders became more and more desperate to eliminate him from the scene.

They hoped to get him involved in theological debate, but Jesus would have none of it. Why talk about the things of God with those who refused to respond to the call of God? He turned the tables on them by posing a question about John the Baptist. They were on the spot; clearly, they had rejected John, but his memory as a prophet was still quite popular with the people. Any answer would get them in trouble—so they passed.

That led Jesus into a parable about two men: one didn't talk the talk but walked the walk; the other talked the talk but didn't walk the walk. Guess which one Jesus honored? The son who acted, not the one who merely talked about it. The religious leaders opted for argument rather than acceptance. They were more concerned with self-image than with self-surrender; more concerned about status than about sacrifice. And Jesus had no use for them.

## **II. God Honors Those Who Respond to the Divine Call**

If the parable hadn't been telling enough, Jesus must have infuriated the religious types with his application. The prostitutes and tax collectors—the most reviled of all professions in that culture— would arrive in the kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders because when they heard God's call, they responded in faith and repentance, unlike their religious brethren.

Are we the faithful or the unfaithful son? Both lied to the father. But one changed his mind and went to work while the other never followed through. Like the Pharisees, we know the answer to Jesus' question—the son who did what the father asked is the hero in this parable.

Who among us, however, has not been like that second son? We all know how hard it is to keep the promises we have made. As Elisabeth Elliot has observed, *“The problem with living sacrifices is that they keep creeping off the altar.”* We know about the creeping. Too many of us have made commitments to God we are no longer keeping!

There's a wonderful truth here for all of us: it does not matter what you have done, where you have been, who you were before trusting Christ. If you will give your life to him—walk the walk, not just talk the talk—God has a special place reserved for you in his kingdom. Even a place for the tax collectors and prostitutes!

The world turns away from our wordy gospel. What stops those outside of the church in their tracks are those who have learned to move beyond the words.

## **III. Our Need for Those Willing to Serve.**

Murray First UMC also has a need to people to go into the vineyard and work in God's Kingdom. It may not make the Bible, but it is a call to serve the local church on various committees and offices.

We need people willing to serve on the Church Council, Trustees, Finance, Staff Parish Relations, and Lay Leadership. We have pressing need for a Sunday School Superintendent and Assistant.

This morning, I am asking you to look in your heart and see if you might be willing to put your Christian faith into action and do something for God and the church!

It isn't only the Gandhi's and the Rosa Parks's and the Mother Teresa's who remind us all over again what faith and commitment are all about. It's those medical practitioners in Doctors Without Borders who travel on their own time and expense to work in out-of-the-way places like Niger. They're told that the people they treat are too far gone, that they will soon die from malnutrition. This doesn't stop them—they do what they can do.

In every church I have served I still remember a few particular names and faces. Sometimes these are people who could not pray in public and were not comfortable teaching Sunday school. Some would not even serve on committees. Some had little formal education. But they were the ones with a casserole, the ones writing me a note when I needed it the most, the ones taking folks who didn't own cars to the grocery store, and the ones whispering as they took my hand at the back door, "I pray for you every day." *Some living sacrifices do not slip off the altar.*

Sometimes the work we do for Christ and the Kingdom are not noticed. There are those individual, private ways we respond to needs and mission of the Kingdom.

I read about a young man who visited the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. One Sunday he stood in a long line of visitors to listen to Jimmy Carter teach Sunday school. He stayed for the worship service and as he glanced at the bulletin, he read this notice: Rosalynn Carter will clean the church next Saturday. Jimmy Carter will cut the grass and trim the shrubs.

It's not always the one who talks or preaches or teaches who reflects the will of the Father. Sometimes it is the one who shows up on a hot Saturday afternoon to dust the pews, take out the trash and cut the grass—making the world a little better for Christ's sake. None of us are too good to work in God's Kingdom.

Likewise, there is a word of warning to those of us who may assume our religion will be satisfactory. All the religious words and ceremony in the world will not replace authentic faith and repentance. God wants actions, not mere words.

### **Resources:**

Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 4., David L Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, John Knox Press, 2011

<http://christiancentury.org/article/2005-09/showing>

<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/article/entry/1673/sermon-options-september-25-2011>