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Matthew 21:23-32

### A Kingdom of Tax Collectors and Prostitutes

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" **24** Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. **25** John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' **26** But if we say, 'From men'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." **27** So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. **28** "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' **29** " 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. **30** "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. **31** "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. **32** 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. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Are you a tax collector or a chief priest?  
Are you a prostitute or an elder?  
Are you a sinner or are you religious?

If you are like me, you want a third option. Surely, I do not fit in either of these categories. However, in our reading from Matthew, Jesus does not give us a third option. Either you are a sinner who trusts in Jesus or you are the self-righteous who trusts in self. As verses 31 & 32 explain, "I tell you the truth, 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."

Talk about a verse that stops us in our tracts. Notice Jesus does not say *ex* tax collectors and *ex* prostitutes are entering the kingdom. For all we know these people are still practicing tax collectors and practicing prostitutes. We know Matthew stopped the business when he followed Jesus. We know that the woman caught in adultery was told to sin no more. Obviously, Jesus does not want us to continue in such practices. However, we also know that we are sinners and sin crouches at our door.

Did you hear about the man who told the pastor, "I stopped going to church because there were too many hypocrites." The pastor replied, "Don't worry we saved room for you."

We are all sinners!

Next, notice that the tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom ahead of the religious leaders. Listen again to the verse, "I tell you the truth, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom ahead of you [chief priests and elders]." Talk about a reversal. Most of us think that the religious leaders will be first in heaven. Whereas we think the tax collectors and prostitutes will be last to enter if they enter at all. However, Jesus is turning everything upside down.

I have a friend who lives down the street from me. He has recently been going to church with the mother of his son in order to get in her good graces. You see, she and her family do not like him. They say he drinks too much and does not give enough money to support his son. Even more, they say he is a bad influence on the son and they will not let him see his son until he starts going to church.

Two weeks ago, went to church. That Sunday the woman's father got up during the testimonial time and said what a lousy man my friend is. The next Sunday, the pastor did the same thing. Can you believe that?

My friend said, "I know I am bad, but why should I go back. I was humiliated. What should I do?" I wanted to say, "Tell them to go to hell." I held my tongue. Instead, I told him that God loves him. Jesus died on the cross for him. I told him that Jesus loves sinners and all of us are sinners. I told him to come to our church. If not this church, then I will find him a church. Please pray for my friend.

I think the worst part of my conversation with my friend is that he truly believes that he does not belong. Jesus says otherwise, "*I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.*"

How do you think the chief priests and elders responded to Jesus? They did not like it. In verse 23 they say, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" In other words, Jesus who do you think you are. What gives you the right to say such things? Don't you understand what this will lead to? You are talking about the rift raft. You are talking about whores and cheaters. You cannot just have them barge into this place. You cannot say they are ahead of us. We are ahead of them. Where does your authority come from?

Jesus knows that he is speaking to a brick wall. They have no intention of listening. Instead of giving into their question, Jesus turns the table on them and asks where did John the Baptist's authority come from? The chief priests and elders knew that if they said heaven then Jesus would say why didn't you believe him. If they said from man, the crowd would overthrow them. And so, like any good politician, they gave the safe answer, "We do not know." Jesus said, "Neither will I answer your question."

This reply is important because Jesus never tries to convince people of his authority by arguments. Jesus knows his authority is based upon who he is and not what he can prove himself to be. Too often we ask Jesus to prove himself by giving us a sign.

A college professor, an avowed Atheist, was teaching his class. He shocked several of his students when he flatly stated he was going to prove there was no God. Addressing the ceiling he shouted: "God, if you are real, then I want you to knock me off this platform. I'll give you 15 minutes!" The lecture room fell silent. You could have heard a pin drop. Ten minutes went by. Again he taunted God, saying, "Here I am, God. I'm still waiting." His countdown got down to the last couple of minutes when a Marine – recently release from active duty – walked up to the professor, hit him full force, and sent him tumbling

off his platform. When the professor came to, he said, "Why did you do that?" The marine responded, "God was busy. He sent me."

How many times have you asked Jesus to prove himself? Jesus, if you are real then... Isn't that the very proposition the devil made to Jesus in the temptation. Jesus if you are really the son of God then..." But Jesus does not prove himself in that way. Instead, Jesus is simply there attracting us with the fullness of his authority and daring us to believe in him.

And yet, it is hard to believe. It is especially hard to believe that God really is forgiving and merciful. For this reason, Jesus tells a parable about a father who asked his sons to work the vineyard. The first son insults his father by saying no to him. However, he repents and works. The second son gladly accepts the invitation, but shirks the responsibility.

In the parable, the religious leaders are the second son. The religious leaders say yes to God. They do what needs to be done. They are religious. They are moral. They do the right things. The problem is that when Jesus shows up, they do not believe him. They cannot believe God would eat with sinners. Thus, they refuse to labor in the vineyard. They are the very ones who in the earlier parable grumbled when they received a day's wage for work in the vineyard whereas the sinners who worked one hour also received the day's wage. They are the wicked tenants who overtook the vineyard and killed the son.

The tax collectors and prostitutes are the first son who says no to the father. Their lives are full of rebellion and sin. They do not do the works of God. However, when Jesus shows up, they say yes to him. Maybe it is because no one has really cared for them. Maybe it is because they know that they have no chance before God on their own merits. Maybe it is because Jesus came in the lowest of forms. As St. Paul reminds us in our epistle reading for today:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Whatever the reason, they are the ones whose lives say no to the father, but whose trust in Jesus says yes! They are the ones who do the father's will. Remember what Jesus said, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40).

Back to our opening questions: Are you a tax collector or a chief priest? Are you a prostitute or an elder? Are you a sinner or are you religious? Be careful how you answer this question. "Jesus did not come for the righteous but for sinners." Jesus came for you!

**In Jesus' name,  
Amen!**