

Responding to God

Matthew 21:23-32

Have you ever been halfway through a conversation or an argument and realised you were in the wrong? I have. Or perhaps found yourself halfway through a decision and thinking. This was a bad idea. I think the chief priests find themselves somewhere between the two in our passage today. It's a public setting and Jesus is teaching and they ask, "who do you think you are to do the things you've been doing?"

Jesus responds - "Well I will tell you, but let's see how you go with understanding authority before we really get into it. John the Baptist. What kind of authority did he have was he just washing people or did this come from heaven?"

And just like the chief priests and elders are stuck between a rock and a hard place. The rock of public opinion as it was common knowledge that John was a prophet and the hard place of refusing to listen to him. What do the chief priests and the elders do to find a way out? What we often do. Refuse to engage and find an option C and the default is usually to plead ignorance.

Will I A: admit wrong doing B: get mobbed. They choose C: Dunno.

So Jesus refuses to engage with their question but he does find a way to help them engage through a parable. It is much easier to expose the second son's failure to follow his father's instructions, than it is for them to admit their own failures. So let's look at how we might respond well to the invitation into the kingdom, starting with the response given by the elders and the chief priests of "dunno".

This is not a good response, but it is an easy one. Ultimately it is a cop out. And I think there are other examples too, even a trend, where people might prefer not to know - and to even create ignorance rather than enter the kingdom.

Jesus is speaking at another time with a man about how to follow God's instructions, and he says love your neighbour. The response he gets from the man is "Yeah but who exactly, really is my neighbour?" As if to say, if I knew for sure who you meant when you said neighbour then I would do it of course, but you can't blame me for not doing it, if I don't know exactly who that person is.

Again the rich young ruler says "Good teacher what should I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus tells him Keep the commands. "Yeah but which ones?" the man asks.

Jesus gives him an answer - "The ones you already know." He says "Yes I do that already what else?" More questions, more uncertainty injected willingly into the situation. Until Jesus gives him something absolute, clear and immediate and he refuses.

The chief priests likely have the same thing going on: "Was John's ministry *really* from God? Well who can say for sure? Did he do any miracles when we asked? If I'd had proof then certainly we would have changed." I'm projecting into our text but this is how they treat Jesus' ministry. Stands to reason it might've been John as well.

It all comes back to the garden at the very beginning with Adam and Eve. Satan tempts Eve through injection of additional unnecessary questions. "Did God really say that you cannot eat of the fruit?" "You will not *certainly* die." The issue over and over again in responding to God poorly comes in the face of telling ourselves we don't really know. And therefore whatever response we choose may be excused.

Sometimes it is like this, when we look to God asking him to teach us it is like someone staring into a pool of water trying to see what's at the bottom. When we give it the right amount of time the sediment settles, the ripples pass and there is clarity. But within that clarity, God can show us something that we rather we hadn't seen or something that scares us and so we stir the water up again because in the moment we would prefer not to see, than feel obligated to act on something we are uncomfortable with. So long as we have another question, we can put off a response.

We give Thomas and Peter a hard time often in the church. Thomas is the doubter and Peter is the guy who always puts his foot in it. I want to take this moment to affirm the kind of uncertainty or doubt that leads you closer to the truth and clarity. We could stand to have more of that and to think MORE in that fashion, but I think what I have described so far is different to that. And I think Peter is perhaps on the other side of the spectrum to us in a lack of caution, he is comfortable acting without a lot of clarity. He just responds. Perhaps before he should and sometimes he gets it wrong. Maybe he should ask a few more questions. But I do find it compelling that this is the rock, impulsive Peter, that the church was built on, the one who responded in the midst of uncertainty rather than creating it.

So what does the parable teach in response to a lack of response? It teaches two types of people. Those who say yes and don't follow through. And those who say no but change and turn. Jesus makes it clear at the end who is who. The chief

priests are the ones who despite an outward profession or an appearance of obedience to God, have not followed through in entering the kingdom and the tax collectors and the prostitutes who had wandered off entirely on their own found that was a rubbish idea and come back.

Jesus shows us that keeping up appearances, things like people pleasing, ego boosts and ticking the box, don't really align with following him, they even make it harder. Talking is great, saying yes I will go and follow is good to a point but there comes a time to respond and when all we have is words we miss out as the chief priests do. They won't change because of what the people think and this isn't the only time that Jesus puts his finger on this problem for them.

So what does the positive response look like?

It looks like admitting we were wrong before.

I try to picture the conversation if it had gone another way. If they had chosen to engage with Jesus' question. They knew if they said it was from heaven (and it clearly was, they themselves go and ask John the Baptist directly if he is the messiah in John 1). Then Jesus would ask them as they predicted, "why didn't you listen?" which would've been pretty awkward, but a chance to respond truthfully. To put themselves in the position of the son who changed his mind and followed the Father. They might've said "Because we were afraid of what people would say! We were afraid to lose our position! We were afraid that after all this work that we have done to be holy it still wouldn't be enough."

In my mind Jesus would have answered their question, as per the arrangement and might have said "Now I will tell you: My authority comes from the Father, and I have the authority to lay down my life that you might be free from all that shame and measuring." I think this was not just a trap or a chance to publicly rebuke or humiliate the leaders. This was an opportunity to reach them. Jesus says in Revelation 3

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. **20** Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

21 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. **22** Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

If you've heard this before you might associate this with Jesus knocking on the door of the heart of someone that doesn't know him. But the context makes a

whole bunch more sense to think of it of the door of his people, or even a church. Verse 22 the final line "hear what the Spirit says to the churches" makes that pretty clear. And as we know from this passage as well as others some of the hardest to convince to follow him were the very ones that openly professed faith.

Jesus says that the prostitutes and tax collectors enter ahead of these kinds of religious people, why? Because they need less convincing that they don't measure up. When they hear you've done the wrong thing and you need to change, let me help you. They aren't thinking: "Who are you to tell me I am wrong?" OR "I'm great just the way I am, you don't know me!" Or "Who says I need your help? I am doing just fine by myself." But we can be quick to say those things.

Which is why each service we have the chance to practice together admitting that no we have failed, and we don't have it all together. We have confession here as a time where we admit together that we *require* forgiveness and help to change not praise for already arriving.

When you look at the parable, there are two kinds of people the ones who have given lip service, ticked the box and done whatever they wanted and the ones who changed. Notice there are none who said yes and went and followed through. As much as we might like an option C here. To be able to say I am the one who says yes and then follows through on it. That is not us. That is who Jesus is. He is the faithful one the Father sent who obeyed. The one who found himself in a garden tempted to lay aside his instructions for his own preference but responded with not my will but yours. The one with the authority to lay his life down that we too would be free from all our shame and measuring.

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