

The Parable of the Two Sons

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[0 : 00] And verses 28 through 32 as we continue our series of studies in this marvellous gospel. On a Friday night in my home, the curtains are drawn and the board games are brought out.

It's a family night and as well as enjoying great food and great company, we play games together like Cluedo and Scrabble and Dominoes.

One of the games that I would love to play is Guess Who? A two-player game where through a series of questions, they ask each other, players figure out which card the other is holding.

The cards all have pictures on them of human faces. Some female, some male, some with long hair, some with short, some with glasses, some without and so on.

And the aim of the game is to figure out by asking your opponent a series of questions which card they are holding. And so the question we ask might be, Is your person a male or female?

[1 : 10] Does she have red hair or fair hair? And finally you get down to a choice between two cards and the object of the game is to guess who the final card is.

Matthew's gospel is a game of guess who played across two levels. The first is guess who is the Christ.

And the second is guess who are the people of Christ. Out of a range of people and figures, who is the Christ and who are his people.

And Matthew's guess who, working at these two levels, is found all the way through the gospel. So for example, last time from Matthew 21 verses 23 through 27, Jesus as the Christ is being described.

And today in Matthew 21 verses 28 through 32, the people of Christ are being described. Not in terms of their ethnicity, their external appearance, their reputation among men, but in terms of their faith.

[2 : 22] What defines Christ in the earlier passage is that he bears the authority of heaven and is therefore the logical, reasonable object of our faith.

What defines the disciples of Christ in today's passage is that they believe in Christ. They have faith in him. Now you will recall that throughout Matthew 21, Jesus' constant theme has been the primacy and necessity of true faith in him.

It's a faith he did not find in the temple in Jerusalem, but a faith he speaks of as being central to life and blessing. It's a faith which is not a leap into the dark, but a faith firmly based upon the authority of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done in his glorious gospel.

And now in Matthew 21 verses 28 through 32, Jesus wants to define for us who the true people of faith are. If Jesus Christ is the object of faith, the object to whom John the Baptist pointed in all his preaching, then who are the subjects of faith?

Those who believe in the Christ John the Baptist preached. Well, as often with Jesus the rabbi, he teaches using questions and stories.

[3 : 56] But bearing in mind that the key point he is teaching here is the definition of the subject of faith. He asks a question. What do you think?

And then he tells a story about two children. As we'll see in a moment, Jesus very deliberately does not use the word sons, as it's translated in the NIV, but children.

The father asks his first child to go and work in his vineyard, but that child says, I will not, but later changes his mind and goes. The father asks his second child to go and work in the vineyard, and that child enthusiastically answers, I will, sir, but does not go.

And Jesus asks the question, which of these two did the will of his father? The audience, composed of the same religious leaders who had questioned his authorities earlier, correctly answer, the first.

And it's in this answer, Jesus grasped the opportunity to drive home the point that the subjects of faith are not who we might expect them to be.

[5 : 13] He says, I tell you the truth, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. And why is that?

Why is it that despised people are entering the kingdom of God ahead of the religious elite of Israel, the temple priests, the holy men of the day?

Why? Jesus gives his answer in verse 32, where in the original text, Jesus uses the word faith faith or belief three times.

For John came to show you the way of righteousness and you did not believe. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe.

Well, there are so many different aspects of this story we could fix our minds on. For example, Jesus clearly says here, it is faith in him which is the means of entrance to the kingdom of God.

[6 : 24] Faith. It's not how a person looks. It's what that person believes about Jesus Christ which is the key opening the kingdom of God.

Salvation by faith alone is only Paul's slogan because it was first Christ's slogan. When Paul says in Ephesians 2 verse 8, it is by grace you have been saved through faith, he is only expounding the teaching of Christ in passages such as this.

So, if anyone should say to you that it's Paul, not Jesus, who was the founder of Christianity, take them to this passage here in Matthew 21 and ask them the question, do you really think the doctrine of salvation by faith alone originated in the mind of Paul, the servant of Christ or in the mind of the Christ whose servant Paul was?

we could also spend time thinking through why Jesus once again uses John the Baptist and is preaching as the authority by which he speaks.

Just as in the previous passage, Jesus asked the religious leaders from where did John get his authority, now Jesus once again uses the message John the Baptist preached as the measure of a man's faith.

[7 : 51] In verse 32 he says, John came to show you the way of righteousness or more literally, John came in the way of righteousness.

As we saw last time, the chief's theme of John's preaching was how he pointed to Jesus as the Christ. So to believe John was to believe that Jesus was the Christ.

This is therefore the measure of a person's faith. Not that he possesses some kind of indefinable ethereal faith in nothing or anything or everything but that he possesses a definite reasonable faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Once more we could ask who is the father in this story? Well this being the first of three parables Jesus tells with God as the landowner in the second and God as king in the third it is reasonable for us to assume that Jesus is referring to God as the father of these two children here in Matthew 28 Matthew 21 verses 28 through 32.

I have no doubt that this is the best explanation. However in a Jewish mind the storyline here evokes images of the father of the people of Israel Abraham.

[9 : 21] For example in the context of John the Baptist's criticism of the Pharisees John parodies the constant Jewish chorus we have Abraham as our father.

Just as in the free church we look back to Thomas Chalmers as our father so for the Jews and in a far stronger way they looked back to and drew their identity from Abraham.

But that being so if Jesus is even slightly alluding to Abraham here and I think he is for what is Abraham best known?

Is it not that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness Genesis 15 6? Abraham is characterized and commended for his faith.

Paul calls Abraham the father of the faithful the father of all who believe. Could it be that Jesus is bracketing this story with Abraham at the beginning as the father of faith and then John the Baptist the one who pointed to Jesus as the object of faith at the end?

[10 : 41] You know these aspects of the story they are all true but both the content and the context of this passage determines its meaning namely the guess who of God.

Who are the subjects of faith? Who are those entering the kingdom of God? Are they the religious elite of Israel who are rather like the second son here in Jesus' story who enthusiastically embrace God's call to believe in the Messiah but in reality do not?

Or are they the sinful and despised of Israel who are rather like the first son in Jesus' story who on the surface of things seem to have rejected the Messiah but changed their minds and in obedience to God's call believe?

And so often with Jesus the answer to that question proves to be surprising. We might expect the faithful of Israel to be these great religious men these chief priests the dignitaries the highbrow those whose job it is to ensure the successful running of the religion of the nation.

We wouldn't expect it to be the tax collector the sinner the lowborn the traitor the woman of no repute the lowest of the low whose presence in the temple was forbidden and who were considered cursed by God and ineligible for salvation.

[12:12] We wouldn't expect it to be men like Zacchaeus or let's get more direct men like Matthew the writer of this gospel whose Jewish name was Levi and who before he became a follower of Jesus and wrote this gospel was a tax collector.

We wouldn't expect it to be women like Rahab who by faith hid the Israelite spies in Jericho or Mary Magdalene who though not being a prostitute was a deeply troubled person.

In fact the subjects of faith are those the world least expects to be so. in the previous chapter John chapter 20 we saw how Jesus turns all the values of this world on their heads by raising the status of women in society of children of the poor of the disturbed while simultaneously lowering the status of the rich and the religious leaders of Israel.

So who are the so called faithful in Israel? Who are the true children of Abraham? Who are those blessed of God? Who today are the faithful of our church?

The subjects of faith in Christ. Well in these verses briefly Jesus presents us with four truths about these people truths which are designed truths which are true for those who are coming to Jesus in faith for the first time or those who are coming again and again and again.

[13:55] These truths are to characterize us as the people of God. First the subjects of faith are children of God. Then they are repentant sinners.

Then they are doers of righteousness and then they are evangelists for God. And I'm asking us all here no matter what others think of you, no matter your status in society, are we subjects of faith? Do we have the sincerity of faith of the tax collector and the prostitute? First of all then the subjects of faith are the children of God.

The children of God. Earlier I emphasized that the word Jesus uses in verse 28 which is translated by the NIV as sons is actually translated more literally as children.

Now Jesus is not using that particular word to pander to our political correctness but because the word he chooses to use is a term of endearment, tenderness in relationship.

[15:01] The word son as normally used in the New Testament has more of a legal reference whereas the word child speaks more to the heart. to the love between a father and his child.

And here in this story we have a father who does not treat his children as servants. He does not command them to do this or to do that. Here's a father who loves his children.

They're not free labor to him. His heart is filled with love for them. loving fathers don't treat their children like skivvies.

The father in the story by virtue of this word children, he loves his kids. And that's very important because it sets the context in which the father says to his children, go today and work in the vineyard.

He's asking them because he loves them and he's committed to them, not out of a sense that they are his servants who must do what he tells them. And as such, therefore, the love of this father places an obligation upon his children to obey him, not because they must, but because they love him.

[16:20] They know that their loving father will never ask them to do something they cannot do. And he will never ask them to do something which will bring them harm.

He loves them too much for that. So the command, therefore, go today and work is delivered in the context not of a master servant, but of a father child.

Genuine, authentic faith in Jesus Christ produces people who relate to God as father and considers other believers as brothers and sisters.

That doesn't mean to say we don't respect God or adore him as Lord. God, we all have fathers and if truth be told we respect our fathers more than we respect anyone else in this world.

But it does mean that we relate to God in a different way. Before we were his servants, now we are his children and we are his father.

[17 : 23] So in our game of guess who, we're asking the question, does this person think of God as their father? does this person obey God because she loves him and respects him and not out of a sense of slavish fear?

The subjects of faith are the children of God. Second, the subjects of faith are repentant sinners. Repentant sinners.

Jesus is full of surprises. I just wonder, did anyone ever tell him to be more diplomatic because how can he possibly choose tax collectors and prostitutes as examples of the faithful?

Doesn't he know that in the Israel of the day, these two classes of people were the most despised?

Yes, that's what they were. Zacchaeus, Matthew, women like Rahab and many others, their sins were out there right in the open, cheating, lying, betrayal, seducing.

And so on. Where does the list end of things they have done wrong? They are the sinners, they are the no-gooders, the no-hopers. Of course, the only difference between them and the so-called religious is that their sins are out in the open.

[18 : 49] In reality, they were no more sinful than anyone else, it's just that their sins were more public than those of anyone else. What then is the difference between them?

It is that to use the words of Jesus in verse 29, they changed their minds. The word here Jesus uses is from the repentance word group.

I guess we might translate it as regret or sorrow. The first child, when asked by his father to go and work in the vineyard, replied, I will not. This is a very tame translation.

Better still, I don't want to. Imagine you asked your child to do something for you and that child replied to you, no, I don't want to.

They would probably feel at least the sharp end of your tongue for their disobedience. That's the way it is for the tax collector and the prostitute. They defied God's call to faith and obedience.

[19 : 53] And yet later they changed their minds. They regretted it bitterly. They were sorry for what they had done and for the way they had thought and they repented. And having repented, they went out and worked in the vineyard.

The difference between the two groups, the faithful tax collectors and the unfaithful chief priests, is that the former repented of their sins and believed, the latter remained immovable and implacable in their defiance of Christ.

The difference is repentance. All of us here are sinners, but the faithful are those who repent of their sin, who turning away from their sin, both public and private, turn to Christ in faith.

Genuine, authentic faith in the Lord Jesus Christ produces repentant people. St. Augustine, that outstanding North African Christian, having been a Christian for decades, wrote, my life is one of continual repentance.

So in our game of guess who, we're asking again the question, does this person repent of their sin? sin? Is she sorry for her public and private sins?

[21 : 19] Does she turn to Christ in faith and find forgiveness and new life? Third, the subjects of faith are the doers of righteousness.

They are the doers of righteousness. righteousness. We learn that another difference between the faithful and the unfaithful is that the faithful in Jesus' day, according to verse 32, listened to John the Baptist as he came in the way of righteousness and believed him.

Now, if you go back to Luke's account of the ministry of John the Baptist, you will quickly learn that John wasn't a diplomat either. He condemned the hypocritical unrighteousness he saw around him and he called people to faith.

repentance and new obedience. When asked by the people, what should we do? He said to them, the man with two tunics should share with the one who has none and the one who has food should do the same.

When the repentant tax collectors came to him asking, what should we do? John the Baptist replied, don't collect any more than you are required to.

[22 : 33] And when the repentant soldiers asked him, what should we do? John replied, don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely.

Be content with your pain. John's message, the primary theme of which was Jesus as the Messiah, was repentance and righteousness.

righteousness. Those who repented were to turn away from their sin and live new righteous lives to the glory of God. You see the progression? Believe.

Repent. Obey. those who do not believe, do not repent, and therefore do not obey and give glory to God.

All this goes to say that the subjects of faith are the doers of righteousness. They are those who, if they have two tunics, share with the one who has none.

[23 : 35] Those who are scrupulously honest, those who don't take advantage of others. Faith in Christ is key, but that faith is demonstrated by both repentance and new obedience.

That's the way it was for these tax collectors and these prostitutes. The latter, when they believed, gave up their prostitution. The former, when they believed, became scrupulously honest in all their business dealings.

Zacchaeus became the prime example of a man whose greed turned to generosity when he believed in Jesus and repented. Genuine, authentic faith produces genuine, heartfelt obedience and righteousness.

The two belong together. The man who is living in an unrighteous way may say he has faith, but his profession is false. The woman who has faith will live in a righteous way, not perfect because repentance is always available, but she pursues love and charity in all her relationships with others. So again in our game of Guess Who we're asking, who lives in a righteous way? Who loves their neighbor as they love themselves? Who is the generous one?

[24 : 52] Whose righteousness is only skin deep? It's not only skin deep rather, but comes from the heart? And then lastly, subjects of faith are evangelists for God.

The evangelists for God. Very briefly, I want you to notice the words halfway through verse 32. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe.

And even after you saw this, the chief priests and the elders to whom Jesus was speaking had seen the difference. Faith had made upon these tax collectors and prostitutes who had believed John's message of righteousness.

righteousness. They saw the difference faith in Christ made in the lives of these despised people, transforming them from being the disreputable, dishonest, and hated figures they were to being righteous and law-abiding citizens.

We might dare to call these people trophies of grace. And the evidence of their transformed lives acted as a powerful evangelistic call to those who at this stage did not have faith in Christ.

[26 : 06] You know, a life transformed by the grace of Christ is one of, if not the most powerful evangelistic weapons in the church's arsenal.

The hater becomes a lover. The greedy becomes generous. The angry becomes gentle. The fool becomes wise. the subjects of faith are evangelists for God.

Perhaps not even by what they say, but by virtue of their transformed lives. I was speaking to someone from this congregation recently who was working in an office where they thought, no one else here knows I'm a Christian.

In a moment of weakness, as sometimes I'm sure many of us do, that person, when frustrated by their computer not working, issued a swear. And their immediate colleague turned round to them and sarcastically said, well that's not very Christian of you, is it?

Believe me when I say to you, people are watching every move you make. And they are listening to every word you say.

[27 : 23] So in our game of guess who, we're asking, whose life is a testament to the transforming power of the grace of Christ?

Whose life is calling others to believe in Jesus for themselves? Well, let's collate in conclusion all our questions and see whether we can win our game of guess who is the faithful believer in Jesus Christ.

In the minds of the people of Jesus' religious day, the answer was determined by what a person wore, religious dress, what a person ate, kosher food, who a person was, not a member of the despised lower class, and what a person did, they worshipped at the temple.

But according to Jesus, these are the wrong answers altogether. Rather, the subject of his kingdom, the faithful in Israel, are discerned by these questions.

who thinks of God as father? Who obeys God because she loves him and respects him and not from a sense of slavish fear? Who depends of his sin?

[28 : 35] Who is sorry for her public and private sins and turns to Christ in faith for forgiveness and new life? Who lives in a righteous way and loves their neighbor as themselves?

whose righteousness is not merely skin deep but comes from the heart? Whose life is testament to the transforming power of the grace of Christ?

Whose life is calling others to believe in Jesus for themselves? The wonderful thing about this passage is that Jesus leaves the door wide open to those who, having examined themselves, realize that they do not have faith in him at all.

In verse 31, Jesus says, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. And by using this precise wording, Jesus is inviting all those who have not yet believed in him as Messiah to change their minds, to fall in line behind these tax collectors and prostitutes as they enter the kingdom of heaven.

He is inviting all of us here today that if we have not yet trusted in him as Lord and Savior, that we now repent, that we now believe, that we now obey his call to trust in him.

[29 : 58] And so we end with the call of the father to faith. Child, he said, go today and work in my vineyard. Guess who are the faithful?

faithful. Could be you. Just believe. We shall now close as we sing together the hymn. through the hymn. Listen together the hymn. Nick, man, aku su ■■ chum sol