The Way of Empty Words

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0:00] Well, that reading that we heard, read, and talked about, and I'm going to read a little bit more of it too, is from the Gospel of Matthew. And Matthew is somebody who knew what faith was all about.

For Matthew, what struck him about Jesus was that Jesus talked about faith always in terms of obedience. So he never talks about faith as being something that was a verbal faith, just saying, I believe.
He never talked about it as being a ceremonial faith, a formal faith, all about religious activity. And it was never just a special conversion experience faith either, even though all of those things are important.
But the real aspect of faith, it is an obeying faith. There is this action. You know, Matthew was somebody who lived faith because he was a tax collector, making money by very dodgy means. And there were three things that happened to him. Jesus called him, and his response was three things. He stood up, he left everything, and he followed Jesus.
[1:18] That is faith. That is what this sermon is all about. It is about obeying faith like Matthew did. And you know, the only reason Matthew or you or me would ever have that kind of obeying faith is if we thought Jesus was worthy, that he had the authority to actually put that kind of trust in our lives in his hand.

That's the question that these political and religious leaders ask of Jesus in our reading. By what authority are you doing these things? And by these things, he meant teaching the people with such authority, like he was God.
They were thinking of also the fact that he called that temple that he was at this beautiful structure where God meets his people, he said it was my house. And he also said, he cleared the temple saying, you will not do these things in my house to make money for your own gain.
How can you do this, they're saying. Well, it's only because he is God. That's the obvious answer. But what happens next, the way Jesus handles that question is full of mercy and grace and love. Because these are people who are going to kill him in a very few days. And in front of this big crowd, Jesus spends time with them, a lot of it, to speak to their hearts about faith in God.
[2:53] He wants them to know the transforming grace of God as much as he wants this for the crowd. And so Jesus says to them, I will show you my authority.

He actually shows it by turning the whole tables against them. He judges them. And he says to them, I'm going to answer your question as soon as you answer my question.
Look at verse 25 in your bulletin. Here's the question. The baptism of John, from where did it come? Is it from heaven or is it from man?
It's a revealing question. Because John's ministry was extraordinary. Thousands of people came from Jerusalem to that Jordan out in the wilderness.
Now, I looked this up on Google Maps and it is a 10 to 12 hour walk for the shortest distance to the Jordan River in the wilderness.
[3:49] Why would people come all day to hear John? It is because he preached that God was coming and bringing his kingdom.

He is doing something new. And John is inviting every single person, no matter how reputable they are or how notorious they are in their life, to receive this Messiah who will come into their lives and to find their lives utterly changed by the living God.
You see, in John's ministry, he was showing them that God is coming close, even to the very public of sinners, the hopeless cases.

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And then, as I told the children, with that powerful announcement of grace, John preached that the way to respond was simply to repent, to turn away from their sin, and to believe, to obey this God that is coming into their life in Jesus.
And do you know that the response was immense to John? This was a revival that was incredibly widespread. He was the celebrity of that time.
[5:05] Thousands of people came. And Jesus, in verse 31, Jesus says, it was especially the outcasts and the sinners that were very moved by John's preaching.

And they believed God by obeying him. And as I told the children, the sign that God had changed their hearts and minds about sin and brought them into a new life was this baptism in this dirty river Jordan.
Soon, Jesus, though, would be baptizing them with the Holy Spirit and with fire, making them alive to God and forgiving their sin.
This is the gift of the gospel to you and to me. Now, if you were there experiencing all of this, it would have been moving. It would have been better than any Netflix show that you could get.
It was live. And what was happening is that people were coming out of the water and they're entering a new life characterized by obeying God and looking for the coming of Jesus.
[6:08] You're seeing this change right in front of your eyes. Now, I love the testimonies at baptisms. And I love to hear the testimonies of baby Gwendolyn and of Mina last month.

I don't know if you were here to hear that. But in those testimonies, Mina testified to the goodness of repenting to Jesus Christ and believing in him.
And she shared about the incredible hope she has because Jesus is her good shepherd who walks with her even through the valley of the shadow of death. And then baby Gwendolyn's parents testified to the joy of being part of the family of God, being adopted into that.
And that little Gwendolyn would grow up in that family to know the grace and the love of Jesus Christ. But you know, those leaders, Israel's leaders, were not moved by John's ministry.
They had all gone down to hear him and to see him baptized. They heard that his preaching was completely in line with the Bible. They had seen these incredible changes in people who began obeying God and living for God.
[7:20] But they didn't believe him. They said he was a false teacher. And they could see that there was nothing for them to repent of. They didn't have any need to get ready for God to come into their lives.

No reason to change. They were God's chosen already. So they were caught by Jesus' question.
And verse 25 says, they got together and they conferred and they said, if we say from heaven, he will say to us, why didn't you believe John?
But if we say from man, we are afraid of the crowd for they all hold that John was a prophet. So the brilliant answer to Jesus is, we don't know.
And you see what happens here. Jesus says to them, I'm not going to tell you then by what authority I do these things. They would be closed to it. But Jesus and his great authority exposes their hearts.
They really do not know God and his working in the world. They always professed faith in God, but their hearts were completely closed to God's truth as he was speaking to them.
[8:27] Their biggest concern? Popularity with the crowds. But wonderfully, Jesus does not give up on these guys. He tells this little parable that is very powerful.

And parables have a way of working in you, in your heart and in your mind. So he tells this for them, for them alone. He says, a man has two sons. And he went to the first and said, son, go out to work in the vineyard today.
And he answered, I will not. But afterwards, he changed his mind and went. And then he goes to the other son and said the same. He answered, I go, sir.
But he did not go. And then Jesus asked this question, which I asked the children. Which of the two did the will of the father? And immediately they answered.
No conferring. The first one. And they were right. And this is the sting in the tale of the parable. It's a sting in the story.
[9:28] Because Jesus says to them, truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom before you. Those very public sinners. These people have publicly said no to God.

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A crucial thing has happened. They have changed their mind. They have changed their mind. And after thinking about God's word through John, they began to obey.
They had true faith that showed in obedience. And that's why Jesus said they're going into the kingdom before you. You're like the second son leaders here.
You say all the right things. You say it really well. Our sons went through a little period of time. Well, they do sometimes too. All in fun. They will call me supreme leader.
Now, I want it to be not in fun anymore. I want this to be serious. It would be a very nice thing. This is what they called me all the time.
[10:27] But you know what? Those leaders, Jesus said, you're like that son who says, yes, sir. Yes, Lord, really, in the original. But you do not go into the fields.

You do not obey. You said it really well. But you don't do it. And those public sinners are going to the kingdom before you. Now, we cannot imagine the shock and the hurt pride that this brought to the leaders.
They were not favored by God as they had convinced themselves. They were refusing God. And they would soon kill God the Son. Now, I think that this parable is not only God's mercy to them.
It is God's mercy to us as well. And the reason I say that is because for these people, they have no faith in God that he will speak to them or save them.
They've already decided what God should say. They don't see their desperate need for God to rescue them. And Jesus shows them. He speaks to their hearts and saying, your greatest need is to change your mind, to change it about Jesus.
[11:38] He is inviting them to live for God, obeying them and not obeying God and not their own desires. In fact, he wants them to experience the healing and the joy and the goodness that comes from that change of mind.

And that's hard to imagine because it is hard to repent in that way. It is a hard thing to deal with that sin. But this is what Proverbs 3, 7 tells us.
He says this. Listen to these words. I just think this is incredibly powerful for us. Be not wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord. Turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. This is what those tax collectors and prostitutes experienced.
They gave up their livelihood for Jesus. They were destitute. But they found healing and they found refreshment in Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus wants for those leaders.
[12:41] This is what he wants for each of us as well. And you know, this parable speaks to each of us because we all have sin in us. Did you notice that in Jesus' parable there is not a third son that says yes to the father and goes out to the field?

Both of those sons have sinned. They do not want to go into the field. And Jesus speaks to us. A few of us may be saying no to God right now.
You don't believe in him yet. I'm glad you're here with us. God is speaking to you. Many of us have said the right things to God. We say it about God. We've done it for a long time.
We've called him our supreme leader. But there are things in our life that we need to change. That need to actually become something that is different for us in our lives.
Allow this parable to sink in your mind. Whose son are you? We all need Jesus to move in us, to change us, to change our minds.
[13:46] That's what we're going to say in communion today. We sincerely repent with heartfelt sorrow. That is the way to respond to grace, the grace that John shared.

And so the important question for all of us is, what will you do with Jesus' voice? That's what we sang this morning. He is God with all authority. He speaks to you personally with his love.
Will you obey? That is the lively faith. Believing God always means obeying him. Is your heart changed?
Is it a heart that will obey even when you don't want to? The gospel of Jesus is the power of God to change our lives and our hearts.
That's why he speaks it to us. Let's pray that God will do this work in us now. Amen.

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