

“Christ in Charge” Matthew 21:23–32 Pentecost

17A 10-1-17

In last week’s parable the Church was represented by a vineyard, a place where those called by Christ are sent to labor. This is the case today also, and will be next week. Like last week we witness conflicting motives among those called to the vineyard. Then, it was about being reward driven versus working by the invitation of grace. Today it’s about those who question the authority of the vineyard owner and refuse to go in, versus those who repent and do go.

Our story happens the day after Palm Sunday and the adoration of the crowds welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem. He has authoritatively cleared the temple of moneychangers. You don’t make friends of Jewish religious rulers by stealing their spotlight and interfering with their commerce.

So, as often before, they try to trap Jesus by questioning his authority to do what he was doing. If he claimed authority from man, he would be guilty of rebellion, for no Jewish leader authorized him. If he said his authority came from God, they would accuse him of blasphemy for acting as God.

And once again, Jesus answers their question with one of his own. Did John get his authority from God or from man? If from God, then why didn’t they accept him? If they answered, from man, they would have lost the crowd that believed he was sent by God.

Jesus has forced them and us to consider the consequences of rejecting His authority. If Jesus has authority from God, then why don’t we do what he says? When we deliberately disobey his commands, or reject his words, we imply that we don’t accept his authority to tell us what to do. Our behavior would say that, regardless of what our mouths profess. Jesus would rightfully say of us what he said about the Jewish leaders: ***“They honor me with your lips, but their hearts are far from me.”***

Whether his parable is good news or bad depends on where you are in it. Are you the second son who yes to God, but does nothing, all bluster but no blister? Ask yourselves: Have I made a pledge or promise I haven’t kept? How am I doing in my marriage and confirmation vows in which I pledged fidelity even unto death? Am I honoring my financial promises to repay a debt?

The Bible doesn’t let us say we are obeying God without honoring our word to our neighbor. We do both or we do neither.

So is Christ in charge, or isn’t He? Does his authority come from God or not? If so, then why are we living in deliberate disobedience in any area of our lives? There is no Good News for those who do not change their mind and turn to do what is right.

At times we are also like the first son whose knee jerk reaction to a command is NO, or “Do I have to? Why me, why now, or what’s in it for me?” This response comes from a sinful nature that can be lazy, selfish, or just plain ornery.

To a point, God’s patience puts up with our naturally obstinate heart. He gives time for repentance, as we heard from Ezekiel, where we read of the one who changes: ***“Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”***

In our parable, the first son did just that. If you are that son, there is Good News for you. God allows U turns. He forgives our temporary rebellion for the sake of Christ Jesus, the subject of today’s epistle.

Jesus fulfilled the law as an obedient son who went into His Father’s vineyard to do the work of redemption. Submitting to God’s authority, He took on human flesh, and died on a cross for our disobedience. God raised him and gave him authority over every creature and a name above every name. He did not have to change his mind. He said yes to begin with, and did what he was called to do.

We play both sons: at times all talk--no action; at other times, quick refusal, then repentance. But we need not question whether Christ is in charge or not. In His sacrifice for us, He submitted to the authority of His Father. He deserves from us the glory and honor that the Father has given Him. He deserves our love because in His obedience even to death on a cross, He loved us beyond measure.

Thankfully, Christ is in charge. We are secure in our salvation, bought by his suffering and death on the cross. Since He is in charge, let us trust him because of what he has done us, and do what he sends us into the vineyard to do. We cannot repay, but we can obey. And in doing so, we honor his name and love our neighbor. Amen.