

# Sermons on Matthew Neither Will I Answer You

Matthew 21:23-32

*With Study Questions*

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# Neither Will I Answer You

Matthew 21:23-32

Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and \_\_ said, “\_By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?” <sup>-24-</sup> But Jesus answered and said to them, “\_I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: <sup>-25-</sup> The \_\_baptism of \_\_John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?” And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “\_If we say, ‘\_From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘\_Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>-26-</sup> But if we say, ‘\_From men,’ we \_\_fear the multitude, \_\_for all count John as a prophet.” <sup>-27-</sup> So they answered Jesus and said, “\_We do not know.” And He said to them, “\_Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>-28-</sup> “\_But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘\_Son, go, work today in my \_\_vineyard.’ <sup>-29-</sup> He answered and said, ‘\_I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. <sup>-30-</sup> Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘\_I go, sir,’ but he did not go. <sup>-31-</sup> Which of the two did the will of *his* father?” They said to Him, “\_The first.” Jesus said to them, \_\_ “\_Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. <sup>-32-</sup> For \_\_John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; \_\_but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw *it*, you did not afterward \_\_relent and believe him (Matthew 21:23-32).

Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and \_\_ said, “\_By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?” (Matthew 21:23)?

## A Confrontation

We are now introduced to a confrontation. Having demonstrated by the metaphor of the withered fig tree that the Old Covenant church was devoid of true life and fruit, Jesus will enter that which the fig tree

signified—the temple of God which had become a **“den of thieves”** (Matthew 21:13). Jesus then finds Himself confronted by God’s priests and the elders of the God’s people who had become **“like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones”** (Matthew 23:27).

These ungodly men of God loved to **“go around in long robes”** while at the same time devouring **“widows”** (Mark 12:38, 40). In the way thieves think themselves safe in their hideouts, these Pharisees thought themselves safe in God’s temple. But one stronger than Samson would now enter the temple and soon He would pull the pillars down (Judges 16:28-30).

These priests, whose wickedness surpassed that of the Philistines, would soon find that God’s patience had reached its fullness and they would shortly be ground **“to powder”** (Matthew 21:44); but not until the fullness of their hypocrisy was made manifest.

God is a patient God. But there is a point where patients becomes license. A father may patiently give his children the opportunity to cease in their poor behavior on their own. But if he allows the behavior to continue too long the children may begin to think the father is giving his approval. God never gives man license for sin. **“God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap”** (Galatians 6:7).

### **By What Authority?**

They want to know **“by what authority”** (*exousia*) He did these things, and who gave Him **“this authority”**. I take “these things” to refer to the Triumphal Entry, the cleansing of the temple, His reception of the praise of God’s people, His power to heal and teach with authority. They certainly hadn’t voted Jesus into this position.

It might initially appear that Jesus is advocating a sort of religious vigilante-ism. Some might misinterpret this passage to think that Jesus approves of those who individually disregard or disdain the structures created by God Himself. I have more than once been confronted by this lone-wolf mentality—these sort of self-proclaimed John the Baptists who think they’re imitating Jesus by their solitary and emboldened quest for purity.

But it escapes their attention that it is Jesus Himself who has now entered the temple. In one respect these chief priests and elders were doing their job. It was their responsibility to protect God’s people from false prophets and false Christs. This confrontation would have been

legitimate had they been truly ignorant of the one who stood in their midst. But we're way past that.

Before we get to the culpability of these priests, consider the arrogance of their question; "by what authority?" We might say, "What gives you the right?" or "who gives you the right?" This is a powerful question.

This can be asked of any man or assembly of men when decisions are made. Who or what gives me the right to discipline my children? Who or what gives legislators and law enforcement the right to make and enforce laws? Who or what gives the church the authority to speak for God? The infinite regress of such a question leads either to God or to vapors. The only legitimate answer to any of these questions is the authority of God Himself.

But the question was a charade and Jesus would now expose their pretense.

**But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: <sup>-25-</sup> The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" (Matthew 21:24, 25a)**

### **I'll Answer Your Question If...**

It might initially appear that Jesus' response to their question is a bit of a non-sequitur (it doesn't follow or isn't related). He tells them that He will answer their question if they answer His. But His question is not unrelated to the issue at hand. When Jesus mentions the baptism of John it is a synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or vice-versa). Jesus is speaking of the entire ministry of John.

And what was the ministry of John but the magnification of Jesus (John 3:30). John was the "**voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord'**" (John 1:23). The question Jesus asks contains their answer. They had been confronted with the truth numerous times and lived in determined rejection of the will of God for their lives.

**-And when all the people heard *Him*, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. <sup>-30-</sup> But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him (Luke 7:29, 30).**

They knew by what authority Jesus did these things. But they chose to reject the will of God for themselves. Implicit in this teaching is that when one hears the word of God (assuming it's biblically accurate) they know it's the word of God and contains what "man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."<sup>1</sup>

They merely had to answer honestly and they would have answered their own question. At what level man's confusion regarding the things of God is legitimate or feigned, it is difficult to answer. But we do know this. At man's deepest level he knows there is a God (Romans 1:19, 20) and when the gospel is accurately preached, men know that it is true.

Their duplicitous hearts are now exposed as we get to listen into their conversation.

**And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' -<sup>26</sup> But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." -<sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know" (Matthew 21:25b-27a).**

## **They Reasoned**

And they reasoned (*dielogizonto: dia, through, logizomai, to reason*) among themselves. they formed a committee to figure out what would be the safest and most convenient answer. If they answered that John was from God then they had answered their own question. If they denied John they feared the crowd. They were governed by fear, unbelief and a desire to maintain their status. It never dawned on them to simply give the honest answer.

There is a limited amount of time to be given to those who aren't intellectually honest or willing to embrace the simple truth. Jesus wasn't going to enter into a silly dialogue of human reason and sophistry. He confronted them on something they knew to be true but chose to reject and the dialogue came to an end with the words:

**"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (Matthew 21:27b).**

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<sup>1</sup>*The Westminster shorter catechism : With Scripture proofs.* 1996 (3rd edition.) (Question 3). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

## From Dialogue to Monologue

Christians ought to give their best answer from Scripture and sound reason. But we should pray that God will grant us the wisdom to know when it is time for the dialogue to end. There is a time when the words, “I think you’re denying something you know to be true” need to bring the discussion to a conclusion.

Although the discussion was at a conclusion, the instruction was not. Jesus would now begin to tell parables and they were free to remain and receive godly instruction. Though it be unwise to allow the naysayer’s to monopolize too much time of those seeking to minister, there are none so evil that they should not be allowed to sit in the back of the church and hear the preached word.

These three parables will end with Matthew informing us of the Pharisees plotting against Jesus rather than repenting (Matthew 22:15). This would be a source of grief for Jesus (Matthew 23:37). But the word would go forth none the less. Our desire to honor Christ in our words and actions should not be quelled by the caviling of pagans.

**Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us \_\_diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. <sup>-15-</sup> For we are to God the fragrance of Christ \_\_among those who are being saved and \_\_among those who are perishing. <sup>-16-</sup> \_\_To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life (2 Corinthians 2:14-16).**

Jesus begins His first parable with a question

**\_But what do you think (Matthew 21:28a)?**

Jesus would now give them another opportunity to “reason among themselves”. It’s one thing for men to ask questions of and about God. It is an entirely different matter when God starts asking us questions. When by His word and Spirit He begins to interrogate our souls, it would be wise of us to respond like Job:

**Behold, \_\_I am vile; What shall I answer You? \_I lay my hand over my mouth (Job 40:4).**

The parable seems simple enough.

**A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘\_Son, go, work today in my \_\_vineyard.’<sup>-29-</sup> He answered and said, ‘\_I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went.<sup>-30-</sup> Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘\_I go, sir,’ but he did not go.<sup>-31-</sup> Which of the two did the will of *his* father?\_” They said to Him, “\_The first\_” (Matthew 21:28b-31).**

## **Two Sons**

There are two sons in this parable. They are both asked by their father to work in the vineyard. The first is rebellious. He answers ‘No’. He later comes to regret (m\_\_\_\_\_ *metameletheis*—regret, remorse, repent, change mind. From meta (with) and melei “to think about”) his rebellion and goes to work.

The other son gives a pretense of obedience. He announces that he will do the work but then does not. Which, Jesus asks, did the will of his father? One can only wonder about the tone of their voice when they answered, “the first”.

The gloves now come off.

**Jesus said to them, \_\_“\_Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.<sup>-32-</sup> For \_\_John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; \_\_but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw *it*, you did not afterward \_\_relent and believe him (Matthew 21:31-32).**

## **I’ve Never Murdered**

It is not uncommon for people to boast in their confidence of going to heaven because they have managed to avoid some heinous sin. “I think I’ll go to heaven. After all, I’ve never murdered anyone.” As if avoiding murder is the sole prerequisite for eternal life! It is a very difficult thing, given our sinful nature and tendency to comfort ourselves because of our moral superiority to Hitler (rather than comparing ourselves to Mother Teresa), to recognize that those people who we would consider most

heinous in behavior (and the behavior is heinous) are no further or closer to salvation than anyone else.

## **Excluded From the Kingdom**

These Pharisees, no doubt, would be insulted to be compared to tax gatherers and harlots. But the insult is amplified when Jesus places these sinners in the kingdom and excludes them from it!

So what is the difference?

John came preaching Christ. Jesus was the **“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29)**. The tax collectors and harlots believed. They did not deny what they knew to be true—that they were sinners in need of a savior and that Savior was Jesus.

These Pharisees were too busy parading their good works before men to reflect upon their sinful hearts before God (Matthew 6:1-5). Sinners were repenting of their initial rebellion against God. They had at first said ‘No’ but were now believing and seeking to do the works of their Father. Yet the clergy remain unmoved. Jesus seems to be indicating that when they saw the harlot and tax collectors come to faith they should have been moved to sorrow (again *metemelethete*) regret, and repentance.

They should have reasoned among themselves through the basis of truth rather than convenience.

**“\_Come now, and let us \_reason together,\_” Says the Lord,  
“\_Though your sins are like scarlet, \_They shall be as white  
as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as  
wool. <sup>19</sup> If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the  
good of the land; <sup>20</sup> But if you refuse and rebel, You shall be  
devoured by the sword\_”; \_For the mouth of the Lord has  
spoken (Isaiah 1:18-20).**

## Questions for Study

1. Are all religions good (page 2)?
2. How does Jesus handle bad religion (pages 3, 4)?

23 \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

And having gone him into the temple went toward him teaching the ruler priests and the

π \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

elders of the people saying in what kind authority these you do and who to you gave the

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authority this? Having answered but the Jesus said to them will ask you also I word

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π \_\_\_\_\_ 25 \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_  
one, which if you might say to me and I to you will say in what kind authority these I do; the Baptism the

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John from where was it from? From heaven or from men? The ones but were reasoning in themselves saying

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26  
If we might say from heaven he will say to us through what then not you trusted him? If but

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we might say from men we fear the crowd, all for as prophet they hold the

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John. and having answered the Jesus they said not we know. He said to them even himself

\_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Nestle, E. (1997, c1982). *Nestle-Aland 27th Edition Greek New Testament*. Includes the Nestle-Aland 27/UBS 4 Greek New Testament with

But not I say to you en what kind authority these I do.

28 \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

π \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

What but to you it thinks? Man had children two. And having gone toward the first he said child

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\_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

go off today work in the vineyard. The one but having answered said not I want, later but

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having been sorry he went off. Having gone toward but to the other eh said likewise. The but having answered said

\_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_ . 31 \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

I master and not he went off. Who from the two did the will of the father?

\_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

they say the first. Says to them the Jesus, amen I say to you that the tax and the

π \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_ . 32 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

prostitutes will lead before you into he kingdom of the God. Went for John toward you

\_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

π \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

in the way of rightness and not you trusted him the but tax men and the prostitutes trusted

\_\_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ .<sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_

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morphology, lemmas, and glosses.;The Greek New Testament copyright 1998 Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, D-Stuttgart. (Mt 21:23-27). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

<sup>3</sup>Nestle, E. (1997, c1982). *Nestle-Aland 27th Edition Greek New Testament*. Includes the Nestle-Aland 27/UBS 4 Greek New Testament with morphology, lemmas, and glosses.;The Greek New Testament copyright 1998 Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, D-Stuttgart. (Mt 21:28-32). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

Him; you but having seen but not were sorry later of the to trust him

\_\_\_\_\_metamelethis—regret, remorse, repent, change mind. From meta (with) and melei “to think about”