

“To Do or Not To Do, the Choice is Our Own”

September 28, 2014

Matthew 21:23-32

23 And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you a question; and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven or from men?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From men,' we are afraid of the multitude; for all hold that John was a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. 28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. 30 And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.

We make countless decisions daily many of them without a second thought. We make choices to wake up when the first alarm goes off or to hit the snooze button, to shower, to fix that first cup of coffee, and to eat toast or cereal for breakfast. We make a lot of decisions daily that do not add up to a lot but our habits daily do affect us throughout our lives.

Consider this example. If we eat burgers every day for our dinner what would the result be over a period of time? We would probably gain a little weight, our cholesterol may go up, if we did not exercise too the results could be compounded even further, our energy may deplete, we would gain even more weight. We might even eat other things that are not too good for us. Then consider what would happen if we made those same choices for a longer period of time. They might seem good for a short term benefit of good food but what is the long term result?

Now, I enjoy burgers a lot and this is not a sermon on being healthy although it is important to be aware of our health. There are a lot of decisions we make every day some of them more important in the short term over what to eat. To do or not to do, that is the question is it not? The question we often ask ourselves when faced with a choice, a decision. No matter how large or small said decision may be or how inconsequential it may be in our lives everything we do does matter and it is ultimately our own choice.

Our scripture today is about choices and how we make them or do not. The scripture perichopy is divided into two sections. The first, Verses 23-27, is about Jesus' authority and how the Pharisees questioned it and then did not make a decision one way or another in response to Jesus' questions. They choose inaction over action. This might seem prudent but it is obvious in the scripture that not making a choice per say still affords us consequences for our actions. The second, verses 28-32, is a parable to further explain our choices and consequences for those choices.

You see in our study of Matthew we last ended with a parable on laborers in the vineyard who all earned the same wage even if they did not work the same length of time. Interestingly enough we come to the next parable where two sons are asked to go to their father's vineyard and both are offered a choice by the father.

It is important to note that the same request was made to both sons. Both sons were offered a choice. The first son said he would not go and the second son did not go. The significance of the parable is not in what was said or who said it but rather the fact that we can make choices and in our humanness we can change our mind. Some might say that is a woman's prerogative because of course we like to change our minds. I have to say that the ability to change our minds is a human prerogative as evidenced and made clear by our scripture.

The first son's initial response was no but then he changed his mind and went. You see he might have answered honestly at that moment in his choice but the end result was the same. He went to the vineyard. The first son's choice and his subsequent choices still led him to the vineyard.

The second son also made a choice by speaking with his mouth and not doing what he said he would. Perhaps this is to share with us that words are all good and wonderful but to abide by them or not is also inherently a choice. The second son told the Father what the Father wanted to hear but did not do what was asked of him. He also as scripture tells us did not apparently change his mind. So he offered his father what we today would call 'Lip Service'. His end result was that he did not ever get to the vineyard.

Then Jesus asks us which one obeyed the Father and the response was 'the First Son'. There are a couple of things to note here. Oddly the First is the one who did correctly. Throughout much of scripture the second son is the favored one who ends us doing rightly and the Oldest or First is used as an example of what not to do.

This is not the case here the First is the one who makes it to the vineyard and the second does not. Now the other thing to note is that parables are often allegories for people in life. In this case Jesus actually explains that the First Son represents those whom we would first think of needing to make it to God's vineyard. The First Son who would initially say no is the tax collectors, the prostitutes, those whom we would say would not feel deserving but who change their minds and follow to the vineyards. The Second is ostensibly the Pharisees. Who as Jesus said "John came to" and yet they still did not believe and did not change their minds afterwards.

This parable seems fairly straightforward that we no matter what we say in the beginning have the ability to change our minds and believe. Also to not offer lip service. You see the First Son was still able to get to the vineyard. No matter his initial choices or the others in between he was still allowed in the vineyard and still did righteously. The Second Son was not allowed as lip service was not enough.

We in our faith often question the level of Christianity in others. It is human to do so. I mean although our sign out front puts it aptly that we are only Christians, not the only Christians. Our societal understanding of Christianity differs from person to person. There is not one hard and fast line and one established rule of who and what makes a Christian. So we create our own levels of judgment.

I mean let us be honest we all teasingly refer to the EastMas Christians or the two fer. You know the ones who only make it to church on Christmas and Easter. Or those who unfailingly come to church each Sunday and live an interesting life the rest of the week. We like to sit in our pews of righteousness and praise God that we are not like those Christians. These are only a few examples but I know I am not preaching to the choir here.

We live our lives in accordance with how we interpret our faith understanding. We act in accordance to what we see as the Biblical rules of living and try to in today's time live as closely after Jesus as possible.