

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – October 1, 2017

## Matthew 21:23-32

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary** (From the *Homiletics* archive; “MAYA Jesus” – October 1, 2017)

Appearances can, in truth, be deceiving. By all appearances, the chief priests and elders of the Jewish people in Jesus' day were the exemplars of piety and religious sensitivity.

John the Baptist, on the other hand, with his hair shirt and ascetic diet, did not fit any proper image of a respectable religious leader in this era. Even if one maintains that he did look the part of the classical Israelite prophet, there were many in the Jewish community who by the Second Temple period had a deep mistrust of prophets and prophecy in general. See, for instance, Zechariah 13:1-6. So when one compared John with the leaders of the Jerusalem religious establishment, one saw two entirely different types of religious expression.

Which was truly of God? Could they possibly both be of God?

To answer this question, Jesus relates a scenario in which a father, representing God in the parable, instructs both of his sons to work for him in his vineyard. The first initially refuses, but later goes. The second immediately agrees to go but then does not. The first of these two sons represents John, and religious figures like him, Jesus included, who were not born into religious service but came to their ministries in adulthood. The second son represents the priests and leaders who were always part of the religious establishment of Judea. The work in the vineyard, then, which John ultimately ends up doing and the priests do not, represents the work of religious renewal and rededication that John and Jesus awakened in Jewish believers. In so doing, they assured that persons like prostitutes and tax collectors who repented because of this message would find a place in God's kingdom that many members of the religious establishment would never realize.

This is the true test of authority for Christ, namely that fruit is born through one's ministry. John's ministry was apparently one that bore much fruit because the crowd believed John to be a true prophet. Jesus' point is that

his own authority could be proven on the same basis. If prostitutes and tax collectors heard his teaching and reformed their lives, then this is proof that Jesus' work was of God. He does not have to answer the chief priests and the elders. He uses John's ministry as an example like his own. If John's ministry has received true admiration and numerous followers, then God must have ordained it. Similarly, Christ's ministry holds the same authority.

Another way to view the parable is that the first son, who initially refuses the father's work but later obeys and undertakes it, represents all sinners, like the prostitutes and tax collectors. They were those who initially showed no inclination to obey God but later repented and reformed their lives. The second son would then again represent the religious leaders who had agreed to obey God but ended up refusing God's representatives, John and Jesus, and their message.

The question of Jesus' authority to contradict the religious leaders of his time was a critical issue. It also appears that Matthew and Luke may have acquired their knowledge of this particular story from Mark (Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8). In all three gospel versions, this discussion of John's authority is followed by the longer parable of the wicked tenants. In this parable, a vineyard owner, whose servants (and eventually his son) are killed by his tenants, represents God, whose servants, the prophets, such as John, are rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. Naturally, the son who is killed by the tenants represents Jesus. Only Matthew, however, includes the parable about the two sons between the story of the challenge to Jesus' authority and the tale of the wicked tenants.

Other, more minor differences also exist between the accounts. In Mark and Luke, the scribes are also among those who question Jesus. In Mark, Jesus is merely walking in the temple when he is confronted (Mark 11:27). In Matthew, he is teaching, and in Luke he is teaching and telling the good news. Also, Matthew alone identifies the elders as the "elders of the people," whereas Luke specifies that it is the people whom Jesus is teaching (21:23; Luke 20:1). Perhaps the different positioning of the presence of "the people" between Matthew and Luke underscores their different views of the role that the general Jewish population played in Jesus' eventual rejection by his own people. In Matthew, where great emphasis and concern are placed on Jesus' identification as the Jewish Messiah, the fact that the elders of the people questioned his authority would have placed a greater conviction on the general population for failing to accept Jesus as Messiah. The fact that Luke simply portrays the people as the recipients of Jesus' teaching and does not identify them with his accusers may reflect Luke's relative detachment from issues of inter-Jewish conflict.

Finally, the major part of John's ministry, about which Jesus questions the religious leaders, is his practice of baptism. This baptism was different from the standard Jewish rituals of bathing. Jewish law required that ritual baths be undertaken in order to purify persons who had encountered various causes of ritual impurity. These water rituals were required in order to restore the person to a pure state in which they could resume contact with others and return to participation in religious life. Sources of ritual impurity included sexual activity, childbirth, menstruation, certain illnesses and contact with a dead body (see, for example, Leviticus 12-15).

By and large, the causes of ritual impurity were not considered to be sins. They were simply conditions of life during which it was believed to be inappropriate to participate in the cult. Thus, the Jewish ritual baths that purified one from these conditions of uncleanness were not thought to remove sin. They simply restored a person to their normal state of ritual purity. By the year 200, when the Jewish law codes known as the Mishnah

were compiled, an entire tractate, roughly one-sixth of the whole work, was entitled Toharot ("pure things"), and was dedicated to the issue of ritual purity or loss thereof. This represents a large portion of Jewish law in this era, but nowhere in this work is the idea presented that ritual bathing could be used to remove sin. So John's baptism was a substantial departure from standard Jewish custom, and submitting to such a ritual would have represented not only an endorsement of this new idea but also an admission of sin on the part of the Jewish leaders that they were apparently unwilling to make.

## Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out especially the sermon from the Rev. Danée Ashley from September 28, 2014 – [“Walking the Walk”](#)
- Some more good contextual commentary can be found on [sermonwriter.com](#)

## Reflection Questions

1. In Matthew, this passage comes the day after “Palm Sunday” in which Jesus enters Jerusalem in a triumphal procession and then proceeds to “cleanse” the temple by chasing out the money changers, etc. How does this context influence our reading of this passage?
2. Why did Jesus not give a direct answer to the question of the chief priests and elders in v. 23? Was he simply (and cleverly) avoiding it? Was he playing verbal games with his religious opponents? Was he trying to teach his questioners something?
3. What did/does Jesus’ question to the chief priests and elders about the baptism of John in v. 25 really mean?
4. In most Bibles and commentaries, vv. 28-32 are labeled as “The Parable of the Two Sons.” Yet Jesus is clearly using the story to make a very pointed critique of his questioners. Do you think Jesus intended the story to make a broader point as well, or was it just “gotcha journalism”, Jerusalem rabbi style?

5. Jesus and John disagreed about many things, and in other gospel texts, they are contrasted (e.g. Matthew 11). Yet many commentators attest that one of the most sure things that can be known about the historical Jesus is that he began his public ministry by being baptized by John, and perhaps was even one of his disciples. And still, we have no evidence that Jesus ever baptized anyone himself. So how does Jesus' own background and experience with the baptism of John influence our reading of this passage?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you "wonder" about when reading this passage?**