

## **The “Unfair” Way of God**

A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
Edmonton, Alberta  
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Text: Matthew 21:23-32

In our gospel lesson this morning, we heard a story of two sons. Both of them were asked to go and work in the vineyard. The first one said he wouldn't, but then did go, while the second one said he would, but then didn't go. I've heard this story a number of times, but what surprised me when I read it this week was what surrounded the story. Jesus was being asked a question about his authority. He was sitting in the temple, teaching, as Rabbis commonly did, and the Chief Priests approached him to ask him about his credentials.

Why did the Chief Priests want to know about Jesus' authority? The story doesn't tell us exactly what he was teaching that day, but if you look back in your bibles, you'll find that this story follows immediately after Jesus has “cleansed” the temple – by opening the market stalls and overturning the bankers' tables. Here we are the next day, Jesus is teaching in that same temple, and the Chief Priests want to know where his authority comes from. They might be wondering, “By what right did you overturn the tables yesterday?” But what they ask him instead is, “By what right are you teaching here?” “What school do you follow?” “Who was your teacher?” It's a common tactic when you disagree with someone: find out what school of thought they are coming from, and discredit it. “You must be a conservative! Conservatives are a bunch of...” “What are you a liberal? Oh, liberals always...” Or maybe you're an academic: “You can't be serious, that's so Freudian!” “Well, the problem with Jung is...”

Jesus sees the trap, so he decides to ask them a question of his own. “I'll tell you where my authority comes from, but first tell me, where did John [the Baptist] get his authority?” This is a pretty clever move by Jesus. John the Baptist had been very popular with the people, and very unpopular with the rulers. Not long before this, Herod had executed John, and the people were still unhappy about this. Jesus had been a friend of John's, and no doubt he was also upset by John's death. So, when Jesus asks the question about John's authority, he is also implicitly allying himself with John and with the people who loved John. We're told that the Chief Priests deliberated amongst themselves. The text says, “And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’”

But Jesus does give them an answer: he tells a story of two sons.

The first son refuses to do what he is asked, to go and work in the vineyards. This is an attitude we know well. “I’d rather not. That sounds like a lot of work, and I’d like to enjoy myself today.” We know from the end of this story that this son represents the prostitutes and tax collectors, people who were scorned in Jesus’ society for not being willing or able to do what righteousness required. This son represents common sinners who, when they heard John’s preaching, changed their minds – changed their *lives* – and began to do the will of God.

But there is another son, who immediately says that he will do the work that he is asked to do, but for some reason he doesn’t. Perhaps he was just giving the right answer because he liked to please his father. He enjoyed the short-term satisfaction of having pleased his father in the moment, of feeling successful, but he had no integrity. He had no intentions to follow through, but he had the right words to say. Or perhaps this son really did intend to go out, but then became distracted by other concerns. He had good intentions to make a difference, but was distracted or tempted by other things along the way. These are also attitudes we know well. At the end of the story, this son comes to represent the Chief Priests, the rulers of the people.

The grace that Jesus teaches us is this: God accepts as righteous those who do the right thing, rather than those who merely say the right thing. The implications for dialogue here are astounding! Do we judge others by what they say, by their doctrinal correctness, or by what they do? Perhaps, instead of focusing on orthodoxy, getting belief nailed down, we should be looking at orthopraxy. The Chief Priests had the words down. What they lacked was action. It was the common sinners who were able to hear and respond to the will of God, as preached by John.

What’s interesting is that Jesus doesn’t give a third option. There is no daughter who says that she will go out, and then actually does. There is also no one who says they won’t go, and continues to refuse to go. In this parable, there is no one who is static – either in obeying or in not obeying. Everyone changes.

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In a different time, the prophet Ezekiel also spoke about change. We read about it in Ezekiel 18. At that time, there was a saying or proverb that seems to have been common. It went something like this: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” It’s not entirely clear whether this was said as a joke or as bitter irony. Someone in the parents’ generation might speak it in jest. “We can do what we like” this proverb seems to advise, “since we won’t experience the consequences.” But someone in the children’s generation might speak it bitterly. “I am experiencing the consequences of my parents’ actions, and there is nothing I can do to stop it.”

Whatever the case, the prophet is tired of hearing this saying, so he says to the people, “The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.”

Now at this time, death was understood to be the ultimate consequence of an unrighteous life. Everyone dies, it is true, but the righteous were expected to live a long life, while the wicked were supposed to die an untimely death at an early age. This is a natural consequence of what used to be called “fast living.” And these consequences were expected to affect the children as well. You know, there is real wisdom here, for we have experienced how substance abuse, addictions of all kinds, child abuse, reckless behaviour, and even stinginess toward ones neighbours can affect succeeding generations, and are often reproduced in them.

But the prophet wants this saying to go away. This wisdom is no longer to be considered wise. So the prophet gives us an example of what he means: “If someone is righteous and does what is lawful and right— if that person [...] does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his or her bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his or her hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he or she shall surely live, says the Lord God.”

This much, everyone could agree on. So the prophet continued. “If [this righteous person, whom we were just discussing] has a [child] who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though his parent does none of them), who [...] oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his or her eyes to the idols, commits abomination, takes advance or accrued interest; shall he or she then live? That one shall not. The one who has done all these abominable things; he or she shall surely die; that one’s blood shall be upon his or her self.

Here we see that the righteousness of the parent does not protect the child. So righteousness is not transmitted down genealogical lines. Just because your parents were righteous, doesn’t mean you’re exempt. But what about wickedness? Surely, the unrighteousness of the child will affect that person’s own children.

The prophet says, “no.” “But if this [unrighteous] man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise, who [...] does not wrong anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no advance or accrued

interest, observes my ordinances, and follows my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live."

The people are shocked. According to their worldview, this seems unjust. Where is the accountability? "Why shouldn't the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?" they ask. "When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own."

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This is grace.

It can sometimes be overwhelming when we look around at the world today, and see all of the problems. Many of them are so big that we don't know where to start to solve them. Many of them go back to decisions that were made, or weren't made, generations ago. How do we begin to tackle the problems of environmental degradation, colonial exploitation, or gender discrimination?

"I didn't clear cut that forest," and yet I feel somehow responsible for it. "I didn't steal land from people who already lived in it," and yet I live here now. "I didn't exclude women from voting, from holding public office, or from universities," and yet I, as a male, benefit from systems of exclusion that privilege me and allow my voice to be heard. The guilt can be paralyzing: what can I do about these things that were set before I was ever born? The grace that Ezekiel teaches us is this: God will judge us according to our actions, not those of our parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents! So we can throw off that guilt, and do righteousness now.

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Of course, this may not *feel* like grace all the time. I'm glad to be freed from the consequences of my parents' actions, but I *know* that I have done plenty of my own that I can be judged for. Where is the word of grace for us then?

Here, Ezekiel gives us another word: "But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; *for the righteousness that they have done they shall live*. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?"

"When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity," the prophet continues, "[then] they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall

die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?"

"Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! *Why will you die*, O people? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live."

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We need grace. We can only live by grace. The first grace that Ezekiel teaches us is that it doesn't matter what our parents have done, or what events have gone on before us. We can choose for ourselves to live justly or unjustly. The second grace that Ezekiel teaches us is that, even when we have started out wrong, when we have sought selfish pleasures rather than right relationships with God and our neighbours, we can always change our minds, and go and do justice. Finally, the grace that Jesus teaches us in the parable of the two sons is that what we say matters less than what we actually do.

Our words do matter, but our actions matter more.

God doesn't want us to die! It doesn't matter what our society has done, or what our parents and ancestors have done in the past. It doesn't matter how we've been living. It doesn't even matter what creeds we hold, or don't hold. What matters is that we can *begin* to do righteousness now. This is grace.