



10/01/23 Mt. 21:23-32. Ex 17:1-7

[www.theark1.com](http://www.theark1.com)

Connie May © 8/27/05

Drawing with permission by Fr. Robert Beck

#### ENTERING THE SCENE:

The weights on the left under the bunch of sour grapes are labeled exaltation and emptying. The ones under the divine justice weight on the right are labeled 'said no but went' and 'yes but didn't go'. Fr. Beck challenges us to reflect on the paradoxical way that God balances things. God sees the heart. Sometimes all we see are the weights. Jesus invites the people there and us to reconsider our initial responses to things. Then he compels us to choose carefully to whom we give authority.

#### Mt. 21:23-32

23 Jesus entered the **temple courts**, and, while he was **teaching**, the **chief priests** and the **elders** of the people came to him. "By what **authority** are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this **authority**?" 24 Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what **authority** I am doing

these things. 25 **John's baptism**--where did it come from? Was it from **heaven**, or from **men**?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From **heaven**,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you **believe him**?' 26 But if we say, 'From **men**'--we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that **John** was a **prophet**." 27 So they answered Jesus, "**We don't know**." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what **authority** I am doing these things.

28 **What do you think?** There was a **man** who had **two sons**. He went to the first and said, '**Son**, go and work today in the **vineyard**.' 29 **I will not**,' he answered, but later he **changed his mind** and went.

30 Then the **father** went to the other **son** and said the same thing. He answered, '**I will, sir**,' but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did what his **father** wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the **truth**, the **tax collectors** and the **prostitutes** are entering the **kingdom of God** ahead of you. 32 For **John** came to you to show you the way of **righteousness**, and you did not **believe him**, but the **tax collectors** and the **prostitutes** did. And even after you saw this, you did not **repent** and **believe him**."

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Once again Jesus challenges those who think they know the mind of God when he tells his listeners that tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom ahead of the self-righteous. Why does he do this?

**PRAYER:** Lord, I have studied, prayed, and listened to all the competing voices out there that tell me that they know your will for me. At times I get more confused the more I search. Like the people gathered around you while you walked our earth, I come to you in this gospel text to find direction. The tax collectors had it easier. They knew they didn't know, but they responded eagerly once you taught with a new kind of authority. Help me as I continue to sort out what and whom to believe. Amen.

#### WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

**TEMPLE COURTS:** Since the temple proper was relatively small, there were various courts that surrounded it where worship, sacrifices, teaching etc. were held.

*Do you know of any comparable places around your place of worship?*

**TEACHING:** By going to the temple courts to teach, Jesus was setting himself up as an authority on religious matters.

*How does this set up the situation for confrontation?*

**CHIEF PRIESTS / ELDERS:** These people were the guardians of religious truth, as it was known at the time.

*Who are the guardians of religious truth for you today?*

**AUTHORITY:** Authority is given to those who have a recognizable mastery on an issue.

*How do you decide to whom you will 'give authority' in your faith life?*

**JOHN'S BAPTISM:** John was highly regarded and even thought to be the Messiah by many. His baptism therefore would be very significant. This sets up Jesus' question in a very specific way.

*What makes John's baptism such a good way to get to the real issue in question?*

**HEAVEN / MEN:** When someone was searching for the source of something it was often set up as either this world or God's world. These polarities established an either/or situation.

*What does Jesus do with this method of forcing a false dichotomy? How does he help to show it is a both/and situation? Does the belief in the Incarnation eventually solve this dilemma?*

**BELIEVE HIM:** Three times in this reading we encounter these words. The central issue was being set up as who was to be believed.

*If you would have been there for this event, whom do you think you would have believed; the recognized authorities, or Jesus, the officially unrecognized authority? What would help you with your decision?*

**PROPHET:** With the advent of John, prophecy was reestablished after a very long absence. This was seen as a sign that God was once again engaged with humanity.

*How do you 'know' when a 'prophet' is of God?*

**WE DON'T KNOW:** Jesus, with his counter question, makes the "authorities" admit that they don't know.

*How does this set the stage for the teaching story to follow?*

**WHAT DO YOU THINK:** As teacher, Jesus sets up a situation that shows those who want to see, just who he is and where his authority comes from.

*When someone asks you what you think about something, what happens to the way you listen?*

**MAN / FATHER:** God is united with humanity by way of Jesus' humanity.

*How does Jesus' humanity help you to connect with God?*

**TWO SONS:** Jesus, the Jew, is revealing that not all Jews are doing the Father's will. They are doing what their culture (see below) expects, but not what God wants. There are many interpretations of the gospel out there today that can help us be either of the two sons.

*Can you identify any issues today that could give you this same sort of situation? If so, what are they?*

**I WILL NOT / I WILL SIR:** As always, the stories force us to make a decision on something.

*Are there any issues that confront you today that force you to make a loving rather than a politically correct decision?*

**CHANGED HIS MIND / REPENT:** John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. The second son repented of his initial decision and did the will of the father.

*When was the last time you found yourself in this position?*

**TRUTH:** Truth reveals the very essence of something.

*What 'truth' does this gospel text reveal to you today?*

**TAX COLLECTORS / PROSTITUTES:** These people already knew they needed to change, the self-righteous, by their very nature saw no need to change.

*Where are the areas in your life that you know need some changes? How can this story help you identify those areas?*

**KINGDOM OF GOD:** God kingdom is full of all those who can truly accept his unconditional love.

*Is there anything keeping you from accepting this unconditional love? If so, what needs to happen to help you do that?*

**RIGHTEOUSNESS:** Righteousness is the state of being in right relationship with everyone and everything.

*What does this story teach about righteousness?*

**PARALLEL TEXTS:** Mt. 21: 23-7 // Mk. 11:27-33; Lk. 20:1-8; Mt. 21:23 // Mt. 28:18; Jn. 2:18; Mt. 21:25 // Jn. 3:27; Mt. 21:26 // Mt. 14; 5; 21:32; Mt. 21:31 // Lk. 7:29f;

**OTHER TEXTS OF THE WEEK:** Ezek. 18:25-28; Ps. 125: 4-9; Phil. 2:1-11; Mt. 21: 28-32; Revised Common Lectionary: Ex. 17: 1-7; Ps. 78: 1-4, 12-16; Phil. 2: 1-13; Mt. 21:23-32;

### **SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION:**

The church, however, is but one among many groups that struggle to humanize the Powers. God, fortunately, is not solely dependent on the church! In Mt. 25:31-46, those who are declared "blessed" of the Abba are not necessarily Christians, but people who actually behave lovingly toward the hungry, homeless, refugees, and prisoners. They do not act this way because they have been taught that in so doing they do it to Christ. Indeed, they are surprised to learn that their acts of compassion were in fact done to him. Nor do they do it out of duty, or to earn a reward. We do not, in fact, know why they do it, or who they are. They may be atheists, Jews, Muslims; they may be addicts, convicts, whores. The tax collectors and the prostitutes will go into the kingdom of God ahead of some religious people, asserts Jesus. Apparently Jesus' God is interested in one thing only; whether we behave in a way consistent with the divine order that is coming. Our religious preferences, practices, and affiliations are, next to that, a matter of indifference.

Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN. 1992. Page 167f.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/080062646X/theark/>

A Christian missionary in the Middle East used to share this parable about the two sons (only verses 28-30) with villagers that he visited and ask: "Which was the better son?" The vast majority answered that the son who said yes to his father even though he did not go to work in the vineyard was without doubt the better son. The son's reply was honorable and respectful. It was what the father wanted to hear. That he never went to work in the vineyard is beside the point, which in the Middle East is always honor.

Remember that life in the Middle East is very public. Honor, the core value of this culture, requires such publicity. The dialogue between the father and his sons in this parable takes place not in private, just between two at a time, but rather in public, within view and earshot of many villagers. Like their modern-day descendants, the Middle Eastern villagers in this parable favor the respectful but disobedient son over the disrespectful but obedient son.

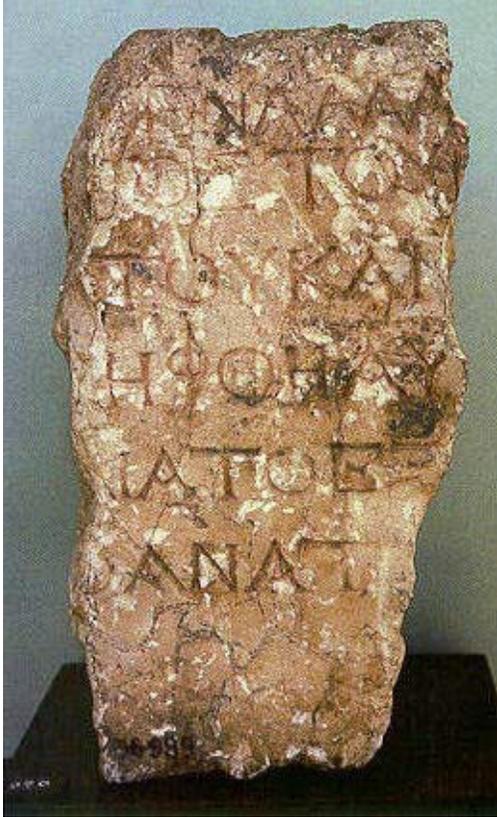
Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus-Cycle A*. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN. 1995. Page 142.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0814622860/theark/>

"Master," asked James, Joseph's brother, speaking softly to his angry leader, "they are priests of God's altar, chosen and holy. Why were you so harsh with them?"

"Good James, and all of you, my Family," he said, "my words are like distant thunder, they announce the coming storm. True, not all priests and scribes are self-righteous, yet their very life at the altar hinders their conversion. While they carefully keep every detail of the laws of ritual worship, they ignore the law of love. Since they are seen by the poor to be holy, they need to truly become holy. Instead, they are like locusts feasting on the harvest field, no more than holy tax collectors. Just as they themselves exclude tax collectors from community, considering them as impure as sinner, so I consider the priests and scribes too impure to be among my intimate disciples. Yet, the kingdom is closed to none! The rich, the powerful, the scribes and priests, however, by their attitudes exclude themselves. They find the gate to the kingdom too small to get through and the cost too great."

Hays, Edward. *The Gospel of Gabriel*. Forest of Peace Books, Easton, KS. 1996. Pages 178-9.



"No foreigner may enter within the railing and enclosure that surround the Temple. Anyone apprehended shall have himself to blame for his consequent death!" This Greek inscription on a slab of hard limestone warns foreigners (non Jews) not to enter the sacred inner precinct of the Temple Mount. According to the first-century C. E. Jewish historical Flavius Josephus, similar warnings, "some in Greek, others in Latin," were posted "at regular intervals" along the *soreg*, the stone balustrade that bounded the sacred precinct. The partial inscription on this fragment, in Jerusalem's Rockefeller Museum, has been reconstructed based on a more complete version, not in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Page 60.

Jacobson, David. Sacred Geometry: Unlocking the Secret of the Temple Mount. Biblical Archaeology Review. 9/1999

A true spiritual authority challenges us with our own potential, our own vision, our own promise of glory. A true spiritual authority leaves us busy thinking our own thoughts rather than merely mouthing his. The one sure way to spot false authority in spiritual matters is the suggestion that your troubles are over and that you have arrived, that the work of your imagination is complete. A true spiritual authority leaves us with our won work to do. There is no final ending. Pg. 104.

Jones, Alan. Exploring Spiritual Direction. Boston. Cowley Pub. 1999.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/156101172X/theark>

"To demand that others should provide you with textbook answers is like asking a strange woman to give birth to your baby. There are insights that can be born only of your own pain, and they are the most precious." - **Janusz Korczak**

People will recognize us as speaking with authority only when they sense that, like Jesus, we are under divine authority ourselves, that our message is not our own, that our actual lives stand behind the message, that our words are meant to reveal God and not ourselves, that we love others enough to give up protecting ourselves, that our real concern is God's kingdom and not how we impress others, that we consider the community bigger than ourselves, and that we are willing to sweat blood rather than get bitter or walk away. Rolheiser, Fr. Ron. Ministering with authority. The Catholic Messenger, 2/6/03. Page 10.

"It is one thing to say with the prophet Amos, 'Let justice roll down like mighty waters,' and quite another to work out the irrigation system. Clearly there is more certainty in the recognition of wrongs than there is in the prescription for their cure." - William Sloane Coffin

#### **SUGGESTED READINGS:**

Greeley, Andrew. When Life Hurts. Thomas More Press, Chicago. 1988. NOT HONORING A PROMISE: Page 51f.

Sumwalt, John E. Forty Tellable Tales for Cycle A. C.S.S. Pub. Co. Inc. Lima, Ohio. 1992. WHAT COUNTS IN THE END? Pages 96-7.

Mitchell, Stephen. The Enlightened Heart. Harper & Row, NY. 1989. TRUTH. Page 37.