

Lip Service  
Matthew 21:28-46

Have you ever said “no” to God? Have you ever known something was terribly wrong but did it anyway? That’s what the ancient prostitutes did, and in no uncertain terms. God’s Old Testament law was quite specific on this point – sexual relations were to be reserved for husbands and wives, bound together by the covenant of marriage. Reducing such a solemn obligation to a merely monetary transaction – nothing could be further from God’s intentions.

And the ancient tax collectors were really no better. As independent contractors, they had agreed with their Roman overlords to collect a certain amount of revenue from their assigned territory. Anything they collected above the pre-arranged amount was theirs to keep, so they routinely demanded more than people were truly obligated to pay. The tax collectors may have been Jews, but they made their living by selling their allegiance to the Romans and by cheating their neighbors – it’s hard to imagine anyone saying a firmer, a more defiant “no” to God’s law of love.

But it wasn’t just ancient prostitutes and tax collectors who have openly and flagrantly rejected God’s expectations of them. No, increasing numbers of modern Americans call themselves atheists, denying the very existence of God. Others call themselves “spiritual,” but insist on determining for themselves what is right and wrong according to what makes sense to them. Still others simply live according to what is profitable or what is popular or what feels good, dismissing God completely from their minds. In one way or another, all of these folks say a resounding “no” to Biblical standards of truth, morality and ethics.

In contrast, the chief priests and the elders and the Pharisees that we meet in this chapter had all said a clear “yes” to God. The priests were proud of their central role in the elaborate system of sacrifices prescribed by the Law of Moses and carried out in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees went even further, not only following all the moral and ethical requirements of the Law of Moses to the letter, but going so far as to make up extra rules for themselves as well. Oh, yes, these religious leaders said all the right things and performed all the prescribed rituals.

But because they were so proud of the way they worshipped and the way they lived, they had paid no attention to John the Baptist’s calls for repentance. No, they didn’t think they needed to listen to John – repentance was just something for flagrant sinners like the tax collectors and prostitutes, for people who so obviously needed to clean up their act.

And the sad truth is that many people who call themselves Christians today are acting just like those ancient priests and elders and Pharisees. After all, we say all the right things: “I walked the aisle and said the sinner’s prayer and was baptized.” Or, “I made a profession of faith and joined the church.” Or, “I acknowledge that everything in the Westminster Standards is true.” For many of us, our orthodoxy is simply not in question.

And so many of us perform all the right rituals, don’t we? “I come to worship, even when it’s snowing. I put offerings in the plate. I read my Bible and pray every day. I’m not like those godless, flagrant sinners, those atheists or heretics, those no-account crackheads, those who sleep around or who cheat on their wives or husbands. I don’t need to make any major changes in my life.” Oh, we churchgoing Presbyterian types can understand why the chief priests and elders didn’t listen to John – I mean, he’s not talking to us, right? After all, we’ve said “yes” to God.

But let’s think again about the first story Jesus tells, the story of the two sons who received an assignment from their father. For His main point is too obvious for anyone to miss: it’s what we do that

matters, not just what we say. That's why Jesus went on to praise the flagrant sinners, the prostitutes and tax collectors – because many of them repented when they heard the preaching of John the Baptist. It was the fundamental changes they made in their lives that mattered more than their initial rebellion against God. It was their eventually obedient actions that mattered so much more than their initially defiant words.

And Jesus' second story – the story of the vineyard, starts out by making a similar point, doesn't it? For after all, the owner of the vineyard expected the husbandmen, the men who worked in the vineyard, not just to say nice things to him, or even to make promises to pay their rent – he wanted the fruit, the grapes that the vineyard was supposed to produce.

So, what kind of fruit is Jesus really talking about? What exactly is it that Jesus wants us to do? Well, we might get a clue from Isaiah chapter 5, from which Jesus quotes in verse 33. Telling a similar story, Isaiah compares the people of God to a vineyard. Choice vines, he said, were planted in a fertile place, but they ended up producing only worthless grapes. Just so, Isaiah said that God was looking for justice from His people, but found only bloodshed. He looked for righteousness, but heard only cries of distress (Isaiah 5:1-7).

And this sorry state of affairs agrees with the second story Jesus tells in our passage from Matthew, in which the workers in the vineyard continually reject the messengers of the landowner. For the fact is that none of God's messengers, none of the prophets God sent to His people from Isaiah to Jeremiah all the way to John the Baptist, were satisfied with lip service or particularly interested in the people's religious ceremonies. Instead, all the prophets continually encouraged God's people to go beyond words and rituals to bring all of their actions into line with God's Word, pursuing righteousness in God's sight and justice among God's people. In short, God's messengers wanted God's people to bear the fruit of changed lives, the fruit of turning away from sin and self and turning back to God – in short the fruit of repentance.

But remember, that's exactly the fruit that the chief priests and elders and Pharisees didn't think was necessary for them to bear. So it's no wonder that in verse 32 Jesus criticizes them for not believing what John said about the way of righteousness. As the workers in God's vineyard, as the leaders of God's people, it was their responsibility to promote repentance, not mere ritualism, to promote true holiness, not shallow legalism. And because they rejected John, the last of the servants God sent to receive the fruit of His vineyard, they also ended up rejecting Jesus, the Son of the owner of the vineyard. By the end of the week, they would do exactly what Jesus predicted in verse 39.

And by crying out for Jesus to be crucified, they were rejecting another critical part of John's message, weren't they? For John didn't just talk about the people's need for personal repentance. And he didn't just urge the people to change their wicked ways. No, he also pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.

In other words, the way of righteousness that John preached didn't just attack the worldly materialism of the prostitutes and tax collectors, or even the self-satisfied legalism of the chief priests and elders. For to John, true repentance meant more than changing our words or even our deeds – it meant changing the whole direction of our hearts and lives. And that's because walking the way of salvation isn't a do-it-yourself project. It requires being in a right relationship with the Lamb of God.

And that's because Jesus is not only the One Who fulfilled the meaning of all the Old Testament sacrifices. He is not only the only Savior of the world, the only One whose blood can wash away even the sins of worldly prostitutes and tax collectors, even the sins of legalistic priests and Pharisees, even all of your sins and all of mine.

No, Jesus is also the One John described as mightier than he, the One whose sandals John was not worthy to take off, the One Who came baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire, the One Who will clear His threshing floor at the end of time, storing up His faithful wheat but burning up the wicked chaff with fire. In other words, Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of Lords, the righteous judge of all the earth, the One Who deserves our total allegiance and our absolute loyalty.

And Jesus agreed with what John said about Him. In fact, as He quotes from Psalm 118 in verse 42, He insists that He is the head of the corner, the chief cornerstone on which we must build the foundation of our lives, the keystone that locks everything we are and everything we have into place.

And so of course we must say “yes” to God. And of course we must bring our actions into line with our profession of faith, bearing the fruit of righteousness and justice, the fruit of true repentance and faith. But we can’t do any of that in our own strength, as the legalistic priests and Pharisees were trying so hard to do. No, we can only bear fruit for God if we are in a right relationship with Christ.

And make no mistake: in verse 44, Jesus explains that there are only two possible relationships that anyone can have with Him. Instead of going on our worldly, self-centered way, we can stumble over the claims of Christ. Tripped up by His truth and holiness, we can thus fall on Him, falling down before Him, confessing Him as our Lord and Savior, and repenting of our sin. But that necessarily involves being broken to pieces, having everything about our lives turned upside down. In fact, such brokenness means dying to our former selves so that we might rise to newness of life in Christ.

After all, that’s what happened to Matthew, the writer of this gospel. For at the time he heard the call of Christ, he was a tax collector, one of those greedy, cheating sell-outs that all the rest of God’s people despised. But when he encountered the claims of Christ, he stumbled. Jesus shook him to his very core, and broke everything about him into pieces. That’s why Matthew abandoned his callous materialism, along with his career and his whole way of living. So complete was his repentance that he left everything behind and he followed Jesus.

But what about those who refuse to allow Jesus to trip them up? What about those who refuse to fall down before Him, acknowledging His rightful authority over every part of their lives? What about those who deny their brokenness and their need for a savior? What about those who refuse to bear the fruit of repentance and faith? It’s not as though they can somehow hurdle the stumbling stone of Christ and continue on their worldly way. No, Jesus insists that if we won’t fall on Him, He will eventually fall on us.

Now, that certainly happened to the chief priests and the elders and Pharisees when the Romans destroyed the Temple and leveled the city of Jerusalem. But one day, that kind of destruction will happen on a much grander scale. For one day Jesus will come again in the sort of power and glory that John predicted. On that day, He will sweep aside all those like the chief priests and Pharisees who have rejected Him and His righteous rule. On that day, all the institutions and systems of ethics, all the relationships and resources in which we are tempted put our faith – all worldly materialism and all self-satisfied legalism will be scattered like so much dust from a broom. On that day, all those who have rejected Christ will have the cornerstone of the universe come crashing down on them, grinding them to powder.

So, that’s the important question for all of us today. Will we go on just giving Jesus lip service? Or will we truly accept Him as our Savior and bow the knee to Him as our Lord? And then, in His strength, will we bear fruit for Him, the fruit of repentance and faith, the fruit of justice and righteousness?