



## Turncoats and Whores – TouchPoint for September 23, 2020

Matthew 21:23-32 (NSRV)

### The Authority of Jesus Questioned

<sup>23</sup> When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup> Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup> Did

the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup> He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

<sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

### Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

*“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going in to the kingdom of God ahead of you.”*

Well, that’s interesting. Anyone want to take a shot at this one? “Bueller... Bueller...” What do we do with this statement? After all, isn’t God’s authority to be used to enforce a moral code. Can God actually be after something more than morality? Can the church be about something more than “sin management”? That’s where this passage begins, with the question of authority. Now it’s important to place this passage in context. Jesus has already entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. He has just overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. There is a lot of rabble rousing going on. And Jesus is at the center.

Who is this one who pays no heed, or shows contempt for the authorities? Who is this one who spends time with the sinners, the outcasts, the broken? By what authority does he speak and act?

Now what’s interesting, is that the question is never answered. It’s left up in the air. And perhaps we are left with the question ringing in our ears.

By what authority are the irredeemable, redeemed? The lost, found? And the heavy-laden given rest? By what authority are those who have always been told they are not enough, declared to be enough. And not only enough, but blessed and chosen by God.

*“Blessed are the poor, the meek, the persecuted.”*

*“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going in to the kingdom of God ahead of you.”*

So, when we claim God’s authority, what do we use it for? Moral policing. Keeping everybody on the straight and narrow, middle of the road, moderation in all things?

*“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going in to the kingdom of God ahead of you.”*

I think it's pretty safe to say that the tax collectors in Jesus time, and the prostitutes, were not moral pillars of their community. Kind of blows that straight and narrow, middle of the road thing out of the water, doesn't it? So, what is the authority of God to be used for? For fencing in or setting free? Imposing a yoke, a burden ... or setting the captives free?

So, here is Jesus, mentioning tax collectors and prostitutes as a positive example of what he is talking about...and now... I'm kind of confused. Because I don't ever remember hearing a sermon about doing God's will and then being told to go be a tax collector or prostitute. I think I would have remembered that one. I'm pretty sure that one would have stuck out when I was taking sermon notes in my confirmation class. And he doesn't just refer to them once in this passage, but twice. So, it can't be a typo.

And he doesn't say ex-tax collectors and ex-prostitutes, he says tax collectors and prostitutes. So apparently, being a tax collector or a prostitute doesn't keep you out of the kingdom of God. And not being a tax collector or a prostitute doesn't help you get in.

And he says they 'believed' John the Baptist. That was their redeeming quality. They believed what John the Baptist said. He doesn't talk about any action other than belief. So, what did the tax collectors and prostitutes believe about John the Baptist...What was his message? Well, it was to repent, to think differently, to have one's mind changed.

But to think differently about what, have one's mind changed about what? We usually think repentance means we are to be turned around to a life of purity and sinlessness. But that's not what Jesus says...He doesn't say ex-tax collector or ex-prostitute. He doesn't say they are now sinless, pure and holy. He still calls them tax collectors and prostitutes. So apparently, being a tax collector or a prostitute doesn't keep you out of the kingdom of God.

And not being a tax collector or a prostitute doesn't help you get in. So maybe we need to be turned around to something else. Or think differently about something else.

The bible tells us John the Baptist preached repentance for the forgiveness of sin. I would suggest, then, it is the grace of God that we are turned around to: our need for God's grace, God's forgiveness. We need to think differently about God's grace in our lives. Not as a patch on the pants of failure, but as the very foundation of our lives. A constant, continual everyday force in our lives.

Maybe that is why Jesus doesn't say ex-tax collector or ex-prostitute. Because there are no ex-tax collectors or ex-prostitutes. And don't take this literally, understand it metaphorically. There are no ex-tax collectors, there are no ex-prostitutes... Because there are no ex-sinners. We are all ongoing sinners. We don't ever stop sinning. We are never not in need of God's grace. Now that flies in the face of my idea of sanctification. The idea that we can get holier and holier. So maybe I need to think differently about sanctification after this passage.

Gerhard Forde, one of my favorite theologians, talks about sanctification not as getting better, purer, or holier. He says true sanctification is simply getting used to the idea that we are made whole by grace. In other words, true sanctification is growing in the understanding of the continual presence of God's grace – not outgrowing our need for grace.

Let me repeat that: True sanctification is growing in the understanding of the continual presence of God's grace – not outgrowing our need for grace. Or let me put it another way. True sanctification is spending

more time on your knees than walking around on two feet with your act together.

Because apparently, being a tax collector or a prostitute doesn't keep you out of the kingdom of God. And not being a tax collector or a prostitute doesn't help you get in. Because you see, there are no ex-tax collectors or ex-prostitutes. There are no ex-sinners.

And now I am reminded of my numerous friends and relatives who have been through the 12-step program. And I think of the way they describe themselves. They don't say they are a recovered alcoholic – they say they are a recovering alcoholic. Addiction recovery is a lifelong process, rather than a final, definitive result.

I like that – I think that applies to me.

I am not a recovered sinner – I am a recovering sinner. I am never over sinning. I am never done with it. I continually need the covering, the re-covering of Mystery's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. I am a sinner who needs the re-covering of grace over my life – every day. A daily re-covering over me of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Is that what Luther meant when he talked about being daily immersed in the waters of baptism. Renewing one's baptism daily. It better be, because I'm drowning here and my only hope is that it's in the waters of baptism.

Because you see, there are no ex-tax collectors or ex-prostitutes. There are no ex-sinners. My only hope is to be a sinner who experiences a continual 're-covering of grace.' And so, I think that's what Jesus seems to be saying. It's that those who have been turned on to, and turned around to, the belief that they are always in need of God's grace, in need of a daily re-covering of God's grace, these are the ones who are closest to, nearest to the kingdom. That is why the 'greatest sinners' go first into the kingdom rather than the religious and holy folks. They understand more clearly than anyone, their ongoing need for the continual re-covering of grace – a daily re-covering.

And finally, I find comfort in the fact that in the parable, Jesus says, “A man has two sons.” Both are children of the father. What they do does not determine if they are in or out.

And both the “tax collectors and prostitutes” and the “scribes and Pharisees” go into the kingdom of God. Because maybe there isn't that big of a difference between them. And lest you think people who call themselves Christians would never prostitute themselves for the sake of being close to political power. May I present our present political climate. Or to quote St. Augustine, “The church may be a whore, but she is still my mother.” You see, it isn't so much that the church has 'sold out'. It's that she's been 'bought off'.

And yet, all are recipients of God's grace, whether they believe they need it or not. All are covered in God's grace. All are children of a re-covering God, who covers and re-covers us daily in His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. And so, you don't need to be an ex-sinner to come to this table. Feel free to bring your brokenness. Your sin. Your failings. Whatever language you use. Bring it all.

Because here you will be given the Mystery's very essence. Here you will be given grace, mercy and forgiveness.

And that pretty much covers ... and re-covers it. Amen

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## **Opening Song**

### **Be Still**

Be Still, know that I am God.

### **Calm Me Lord**

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.  
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.  
Let all the tumult within me cease.  
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

### **The Lord's Prayer**

## **The Meal**

### **Come Drink of Living Water**

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

## **Benediction**

### **The Lord Bless You and Keep You**

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. To shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you. And give you peace.