

## 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: What Does the Father Want?

“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.” This is a strong proclamation from Jesus! We might have a knee-jerk reaction to that statement. We’d like to say that we’re not lumped into the “you” here, that Jesus can’t be addressing us. He’s talking to the religious leaders. But when we reflect on the behaviors and beliefs of these men, we might wonder... what more could God want? These men were dedicated to the Word, striving to uphold God’s commands and poring over the Scriptures. They honored the Sabbath fervently. They fasted more than was necessary at times. They faithfully gave a tenth of their wages in offering. If these men weren’t the example of what the Father wants, who is? Surely it can’t be wicked sinners like the tax collectors and prostitutes.

What *does* the Father want? As these chief priests and elders approached Jesus, they might have had that in mind. They thought that *they* were doing what the Father wanted, and from their perspective Jesus posed a challenge to that work. They weren’t convinced that this Teacher from Nazareth was walking in the way of righteousness. Jesus and his followers didn’t observe the Sabbath in the same way that they did. Jesus ate with sinners and didn’t require the traditional ceremonies for washing dishes. They questioned his behaviors so much that at times the religious leaders wondered if Jesus was a servant of the devil himself. And just the day before our reading, Jesus came into the temple, *their domain*, and he cleared out the moneychangers, with the declaration, “You are making *my house* a ‘den of robbers.’” Who did this Jesus think he was? They asked, “**By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?**” (23).

To come into their territory, during the Jewish High Festival of Passover, and to clear out the temple – to call it his

house! – they were getting a bit defensive. Who is Jesus to say what is right and wrong? And yet, they knew from Jesus’ ministry where his power came from. Their question of his authority only had two answers: Jesus could get his authority from heaven or from man. If he claimed authority from God, they could catch him in blasphemy. Jesus answered back with another question: “**John’s baptism – where did it come from?**” (25). This wasn’t in disrespect or ignoring their question. Jesus was saying that these two queries had one and the same answer – if they were willing to admit that John’s baptism was from heaven, why not Jesus’ authority?

So, who sets up the way of righteousness? How do we know what the Father wants? Does this come from heaven or from man? Listen to what Psalm 1 says: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Surely, those chief priests and elders delighted in the law of the LORD. They exalted the teachings of Moses and guided their people in observing all the ordinances. The catalog of all their righteous deeds would fill endless scrolls of parchment!

This was their way of righteousness – to present themselves as holy before God by their works. As faithful Christians, you know this is impossible. By nature, no one is righteous in God’s sight. We’re all tainted, stained, filthy because of our sins. But when we see our lost condition, our hearts still hold this desire to save ourselves. It makes sense to think that because of all that we’ve done wrong, because we’ve offended and hurt God, we have to do something to appease him, to make it up, and to repair the relationship. And so, we try our hardest, we want to live holy lives, to be presentable

and even admirable in the world's eyes and hopefully God's eyes too. This is one way of making man the authority of deciding what the Father wants.

To illustrate this lesson of pleasing the Father, Jesus tells this brief story. A man who owned a vineyard had two sons. He went to one and asked him to go out and work. In a brash response, the first son says, "I don't want to." When the father asked his other son, this child eagerly says, "Me! I'll do it! Yes, sir!" He knew just what to say to look good and pleasing to his father. But these words proved empty. The son ended up not going and working in the vineyard. Is this what the Father wants? A display of good words, even actions and behaviors that look pleasing? God sees through to the heart. As Jesus continued teaching the crowds on that day, he called out seven woes on the Pharisees and teachers of the law. As you read through Matthew 23, you see how hypocritical these religious leaders were. They had the responsibility of sharing Moses' law, the commands of God. But they placed a burden on the people that they themselves weren't willing to carry. They didn't practice what they preached. Jesus calls them white-washed tombs. They looked shiny and pure on the outside but were stuffed with stinking, rotten bones. Their hearts were filled with greed as they only wanted to exalt their own names.

Jesus was deeply saddened by their spiritual state. As he looked across this holy city, he cried out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." Just as their ancestors despised the message of the prophets who called out their sin, these religious leaders had rejected John the Baptist. When he came in the way of righteousness and preached a baptism of repentance and

forgiveness, the teachers from Jerusalem were wary. And John called them out on their behavior! He told them to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. In other words, their lives weren't bearing the fruit that God wanted. Even when the chief priests and elders saw that those they considered "outsiders" accepted John's message, they still weren't willing to believe that *they* didn't have the right way.

But our Lord doesn't desire grand shows of sacrifice and observance of festivals. He doesn't need lavish offerings. We could bring all our best deeds to the Father, build the grandest churches, give all our time to worthy causes – but even these are filthy rags before him if our hearts are unrepentant. This way of righteousness is not what the Father wants. Because of the filth hiding in their hearts and ours, Psalm 1 proclaims, "The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." **Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of you (31).**

Our own way of righteousness fails, and in our wickedness we will perish. How challenging it is to do what the Father wants! So often, we look upfront like the first son in Jesus' parable. We are bratty children who say, "I don't want to." We're well aware of how God wants us to live, but the sinner in each of us is hostile to God's commands. Instead of walking in the way of righteousness, we love to walk in the way of the wicked. We've made cozy spots in our hearts for those sins to take root and grow. This also makes man the authority. It exalts the self, not by boasting about the good we have done, but by chasing the evil desires we crave. And all because our hearts are unwilling. We are filled with lust and greed and every other wicked thing.

What does the Father want with rebellious children? To destroy us? As God looked at our unwilling hearts, he sent his Son Jesus to this world. To a people exalting self and neglecting others. Jesus came to show true righteousness, to do what the Father wants. Jesus wasn't trying to overtake the position of these teachers to establish his own following for selfish gain. He came as the Son who says, "Yes, Lord, I will do it. Not my will, but yours be done." And this was the Father's will – that Jesus would humble himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross. By his perfect life and innocent death, Jesus becomes *the* way of righteousness. We're restored before the Father not by our own holy works, but by faith alone in Christ Jesus our Lord. Through faith in the Son who was willing, we receive a washing and renewal. We aren't just cleaned like a freshly washed marble tombstone or like dishes polished on the outside but with crumbs caked on the inside. God has cleansed us to our very core, wiping away every last sin.

Through our humble Savior, there is salvation free and full – and for all. For even those considered the vilest of sinners. Those who we might look down on, Christ looks at in love. Imagine this situation: As you're walking into church one week, you see someone getting out of her car, a visitor to our congregation. She doesn't look like most of us here. In fact, she looks a bit intimidating. As she walks up to the door, do we want her to see side glances and catch whispers which tell her, "You're not welcome here"? Maybe we put on a nice smile to welcome this newcomer, but harbor hateful thoughts in our hearts. Are we the son saying, "Yes, Lord, I will work" but not doing what the Father wants? Are we like chief priests and elders closing the door to the kingdom to those who so desperately want to enter? Behavior like this may communicate

that we are confident in our own righteousness, but this righteousness is not for all.

Yet, we rejoice in our Savior because the kingdom of heaven has been opened to such as these! What does the Father want? God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. God looks down on no one, but he has rescued us all from our filthy state. He restores both those considered "outsiders" and those "insiders" who fight against pride. Through the Word and Sacraments, the Spirit graciously turns our hearts to God, making the unwilling willing. When we reflect on our wickedness, past and present, God moves us to repentance. He has brought us out of the darkness and enlightened the way of righteousness for us. Now, we crave doing what God desires. He has miraculously made this change in our lives so that we *can* do what the Father wants. As new children, we can follow Jesus, saying, "Yes, Lord! I want to." And these aren't empty words. Through faith, we bear good fruits in God's vineyard. He has made us loving, gentle, forgiving, encouraging. Thanks be to God for the work he does through us in Jesus' name!

What does the Father want? He wants tax collectors and prostitutes, arrogant church leaders, greedy cheaters, angry parents, disrespectful children, people who have hurt, hated, lusted, stolen, lied. He wants *us*. He wants us to know the way of righteousness. To know that his authority came from heaven, and that he used his power for our sake. The Son came down from heaven to do the Father's will by opening the kingdom to lost sinners. Because Jesus was willing and obedient, he has turned our hearts and made *us* righteous, willing, and obedient children. With joy and confidence, we go into God's vineyard, saying, "Yes, I will do what the Father wants." And in God's grace, we do! Amen.