

Sermon: A Father's Request

9/27/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“I already asked you nicely. I’m not going to ask you again.” Over the past few months, I’ve said this phrase many times to my oldest son, Thane. “It’s time to go on a walk;” I say nicely the first time, “can you please put on your shoes?” “Thane, can you please stop talking and eat your breakfast.” “I know you like to hug your brother, but can you please not hug him so long or so hard?” I do my best to ask him nicely the first time. The second time the question transitions to more of a demand. “Thane,” I say in a deeper tone with my finger pointing towards his shoes, “go and put on your shoes before our walk.” “Thane, stop talking and eat your breakfast.” “Thane, stop hugging your brother so hard and long.” Finally, the third time, no more Mr. Nice Guy. “Thane, put on your shoes right now or I will put you in timeout for not listening. I already asked you nicely. I’m not going to ask you again.”

When the chief priests and elders arrived at the Temple in today’s Gospel lesson, they were done being “Mr. Nice Guy.” They had already asked Jesus nicely. “Jesus, for years we’ve let you to stand on the steps of this Temple and question our authority. We’ve listened as you told others to ‘beware of false prophets’ and challenged the religious laws that we teach and uphold. Can you please stop doing things like working on the Sabbath and alluding to people like us as ravenous wolves in sheep’s clothing?” They asked him nicely the first time but he didn’t listen. So they went to him again, this time a little more demanding. “Jesus, you need to stop doing things like calling yourself ‘God’s chosen servant,’ teaching others they don’t need to honor their father and mother, and refusing to follow religious tradition, like washing your hands before you eat.” But he just wouldn’t stop. In fact, his behavior only got worse. Just earlier that

week, he had ridden a donkey into Jerusalem amidst an adoring crowd and then went to the Temple and overturned the tables of the money changers and drove everyone out. “Jesus, this behavior needs to stop now. What could have ever led you to think that you have the right to say and do such unacceptable things. We already asked you nicely. We’re not going to ask you again.” Or to put their response a little differently, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” The implication of their question being quite clear...

The chief priests and elders were trying to leave Jesus with two options. First, confess that he doesn’t have any authority. Confess that he is just some rogue, wondering, wannabe prophet spouting nonsense and lies. After all, everyone knew that they were the religious authorities and as such that they were the ones who spoke for God. At no point had they given Jesus permission to speak on God’s behalf, and they never would. “Either confess that you are a fake and a fraud,” we hear them taunt Jesus, “or tell them the truth. Tell them that you believe that God has authorized you, an uneducated carpenter, a nobody, to speak on God’s behalf. Commit blasphemy, we dare you, and then be prepared to pay the consequences.”

The irony was thick. The chief priests and elders wanted Jesus to answer truthfully so that they could use the truth against him. They wanted to turn the truth into a knife and stab him in the back with it. Amazing how we twist and turn the truth, isn’t it? How we use, manipulate, and sometimes even deny it for our own benefit. Jesus knew what awaited him if he truthfully answered their question. No, he was not afraid of his death. Just a few days later, he would acknowledge to the chief priests and elders that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and be crucified as a result. But there were still things that he needed to teach and do, so rather than answer their question he asked them one of his own; one which succeeded in turning the tables.

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven,” we hear him ask, “or was it of human origin?” As the chief priests and elders began to discuss the question, they realized that they were trapped. Just before baptizing Jesus, John the Baptist had declared that Jesus is Lord. If they answered that John had spoken truthfully, on one hand, then their opposition to Jesus would be called into question. If they denied that John’s message came from God, on the other hand, then the crowd would turn against them. Not liking either of these options, they gave the only answer they could think of, “We do not know.” To which Jesus responded, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. I will, though, leave you with a parable, the meaning of which you will soon understand.”

“A man had two sons,” Jesus begins. “One day he went to the first son and said, ‘Son, go and work in my vineyard today.’ The son refused, but later changed his mind and went. Then the father went to his second son and made the same request. This son answered, ‘Sir, I will go,’ but he never did. Which of the two sons did the will of his father?” The chief priest and elders quickly replied, “The first son,” confident that they had made the right choice. Then Jesus revealed to them who they are in the story. “You may think that you are the first son, but you are not. Like the second son, you have promised to follow God and do as God commands. And yet, when you heard John proclaim that I am the Lord, you refused to listen and have gone your own way. No, the first son is like the tax collectors and prostitutes standing before you today. While they may not have always done the Father’s will, when they heard what John was telling them, they were willing accept who I am and change their ways. Truly I tell you, these tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

As you might expect, the chief priests and elders were enraged. “How dare he say that we are worse than tax collectors and prostitutes,” we can hear them muttering amongst themselves.

They were so mad that they wanted to arrest him and throw him in jail right then and there, as if we needed more evidence that they are the second son. But they feared that the crowd would turn against them if they did, so they let Jesus go and began conspiring behind the scenes, waiting for the right time to get rid of their little problem. In that moment, their minds and hearts were made up, and there was nothing that Jesus could do to change them.

As you listened to Jesus tell the “Parable of the Two Sons” just a few minutes ago, who were you in the story? Did you see yourself in the first son, or much like me, did you see yourself more in the second? Because the truth is that the second son, like the chief priests and elders that day, is the devout believer who says all the right things, who regularly attends worship, and sometimes even helps lead it. To the outside world, the second son is everything that a Christian should be. Except that when the time comes to put those words to the test and discover if they are truly committed to doing the will of the Father, their actions show their words to be hollow. That is the difference between *being seen* as a Christian and *being* a Christian. Being a Christian requires that we not just say, “Yes, Lord, I will go work in the vineyard,” but that we actually go and do the hard, day-after-day, sometimes unexpected work which the Father asks of us. It requires that we not just say and do the right things when they are convenient, but each and every day of our lives. It requires dedication, devotion, and a willingness to admit when we are wrong and when we make mistakes. And let’s be honest, we Christians have long had a bit of a God Complex.

As Christians, we are taught that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the light. We are taught that in following Jesus and in reading Scripture we come to learn God’s will, and as a result, we assume all-too-often that we are always right. We assume that we are the ones who need to take the truth to others, rather than being the ones who need to hear the good news. We assume that

everyone who disagrees with us must be wrong, because admitting that we are wrong might mean that things have to change. And in so doing, we begin to sound a lot like the chief priests and elders. The reason why Jesus looked towards the tax collectors and prostitutes was not because they were perfect. Rather, it was because they knew just how imperfect they were. In Jesus' day, these were the people who were most acutely aware of their separation from God, and thus the ones who recognized just how desperately they needed God, just how much they longed to work and be in the vineyard.

The Father has asked each one of us to go and work in the vineyard. We've been asked nicely, "Jared, next time you see the homeless man standing outside your son's preschool, don't just drive on by. Please give him a bottle of water and a few bucks, and hope and pray that they help him along the way." We've heard the question become more of a demand. "Jared, you drove right by that homeless man again this morning. Don't you remember that time when I said that whenever you don't give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, or visit the sick and in prison that you are doing so to me? Don't let it happen again." And we've had those times when God is done being Mr. Nice Guy. "Jared, no more excuses. You need to stop driving by him. I already asked you nicely..."

It's not an easy thing to humble ourselves before God and admit that we might be wrong, to admit that we are not as perfect as we would like everyone to believe. Fortunately, God doesn't require that we're perfect. All that God asks is that, at some point along the way, we go where God is calling us to go, do what God is calling us to do, and be who God is calling us to be. And we are blessed, for while there may be times when God is done asking us nicely, God will always be there to ask us again. Amen.