

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 21:23-32
“Controversy”

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Matthew 21:23-32

Verse 23a

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him.

- This happened on the Monday of Holy Week, the day after Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the animal sellers. After returning to Jerusalem from Bethany, Jesus went into the Temple again.
- As he taught the people in the Temple, he was approached by the chief priests and the elders, those who were in charge of the place.

Verse 23b

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

- These men knew that no one had authority to teach in the Temple unless it came from them. Part of their job was to protect the people from false teachers. Since they had not given Jesus authority to teach, heal (see verse 14), or deal with the moneychangers and animal sellers (see verses 13-16), they wanted to expose him as a false teacher. So they asked him, before those he was teaching, who had given him the authority to teach, etc., in the Temple.

Verse 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.”

- Almost flippantly, Jesus agrees to answer their question to him if they will first answer his question to them. He is not overly respectful as he responds to their inquiry. His attitude must have been shocking to the chief priests and the elders as well as those who watched.

Verse 25

“John’s baptism -- where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?”

- Jesus’ question concerns his cousin, John the Baptist (See Matthew 3:1-12, John 1:19-28, 3:22-35). John called the people of Israel to repentance in preparation for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. However, the chief priests and the elders had also questioned his teaching. John was very popular with the people. King Herod executed John (See Matthew 14:1-12) because he questioned the legitimacy of Herod’s marriage. This all made John a kind of folk hero. He was deeply loved by the common people of the time.

Verse 25b-26

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’ -- we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

- The chief priests and the elders held a caucus to decide how to answer Jesus’ question.
- The authorities recognized that Jesus’ question put them in a difficult place. In truth, they did not believe that John was a prophet as the people did. They believed that his teachings were false. However, they knew that if they answered Jesus’ question honestly, they risked losing the peoples’ respect.

Verse 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.”

- Because either response would be unacceptable to them, the chief priests and the elders decided not to answer Jesus’ question about John.
- Therefore, with outright contempt for them, Jesus refuses to answer their question to him.

Verse 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.’”

- While refusing to answer their question, Jesus continues to speak to them. He tells them a story, a parable, that begins with the question, “What do you think?”
- The story is about a man who has two sons, one of whom he asks to go and work in the family’s vineyard.

Verse 29

“ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.”

- At first, the man’s son refuses to do as his father asked. But after giving it some thought, he repents of his first decision and does what his father requested.

Verse 30

“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.”

- The father approached the second son with the same request.
- This son answered with due respect to his father saying that he would do as was requested, but then did not do as was requested at all.

Verse 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.”

- This would have been an extremely offensive thing to say to these leaders of the Temple and the people of Israel. Tax collectors and prostitutes were outcasts. They were considered unworthy of the kingdom of God. The chief priests and the elders were considered to be very holy persons, absolutely sure of a place in the kingdom of God.

Verse 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.”

- The tax collectors and the prostitutes were like the first son of the father in the story. At first, they did not obey the will of the father. But after thinking about it, they repented and did what the father asked.

- The chief priests and the elders were like the second son of the father in Jesus' story. They appeared to be doing what the father requested but, in truth, refused.
- Therefore tax collectors and prostitutes were before them, in God's eyes, because they did the will of the father. And even seeing the response of those previously outside, now come to God, they did not rejoice. Instead they persisted in their stubborn refusal to do what the father asked.

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