

Jesus' Powerful Parables 2) A Story of Spiritual Insincerity

Matthew 21:23-32 • 2023-10-01



A few years ago, one of basketball's biggest stars decided to start a new school. As a wealthy celebrity he decided to dedicate millions of his own dollars to help establish and operate a new school. Unlike most other schools funded by celebrities his school would not be a private school. It would be a part of the public school system, only enhanced to better serve its students. This school boasted that it would do amazing things that other schools in the district couldn't do. And it even took on the name "I Promise" school. If there was ever a school that talked that talk, this was it. Not only was it supported by a world-famous celebrity, but it was praised by many politicians and celebrities. But there was a problem. The school ended up with some critics, including some people in the school district and involved with the school. After the first few years of operating the school, the academic results showed that the school didn't necessarily live up to its name. When it came to meeting standards for being proficient in math, every student failed. Not even one of the students who started in the school tested proficient in math after three years. Zero. More recently it still rates in the bottom 10% of all public schools in Ohio. And this might not have bothered people so much except this was a school that talked as if it were going to be the best in the district out of all the public schools. It had the most money and highest student-teacher ratio in the public schools. Yet it rated as one the worst in many key areas of performance.

I suppose you need to commend the effort. The goal was noble. But the result was not. At the end of the day no one likes someone who talks big but doesn't walk the walk. It doesn't matter whether you like public or private schools, celebrities or sports, nobody likes a fake. People are quick to sniff out and spot a fake --from fake brands, fake dating profiles, fake product claims, to fake people we just don't like it when people portray themselves as good but are all words without substance.

What about the way God sees your life? Do you claim to be one of the better people in God's kingdom? If so, how does your record stack up not just in their eyes, but in God's evaluation? God can spot insincerity and knows a fake when he sees one. Today we hear another story from Jesus, and we learn from his powerful parable the importance of recognizing spiritual insincerity.

The religious leaders approached Jesus to challenge him. They thought he was a fake and refused to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. And when Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem with the crowds praising him on Sunday, it infuriated them. When Jesus drove out the money changers from the temple on Monday it enraged them. They couldn't stand the man Jesus who now, on Tuesday was in the temple courtyards teaching the people. They interrupted his teaching to challenge him. They wanted to challenge his authenticity. They considered him a fake who only talked big. They asked, "By what authority are you doing these things?" In other words, "Who do you think you are?"

Jesus knew that these religious leaders weren't looking for answers. He knew they just wanted him dead and were looking for ways to kill him. He knew they were insincere in their concern over the proper authority. They already had it in their mind they were the only authority. So, he answered their question with a probing question of his own. "I'll answer you if you answer one question. John's baptism, was it from heaven or from men?"

Jesus wasn't evading the question. He was directing them to see his authenticity as the Christ. It had been long established. God had foretold in Scripture that he would anoint his Son to be the redeemer and ruler of all. The prophets foretold that there would be a forerunner who would announce the Messiah. And that man was John. He reached people all over Judea with his preaching and baptizing. John's baptism was for repentance for forgiveness of sins. And John's preaching pointed people to Jesus as the Christ. He told the crowds, "I have seen, and I testify that (Jesus) is the Son of God." John pointed the people to Jesus as having so great a position that John wasn't even worthy to be his foot washer. John gave full testimony and preached with conviction on Jesus' authority. If John came by mere human authority, then perhaps Jesus was a fake. But if John was sent by God, then Jesus was the real deal.

The religious leaders proceeded to do what most false teachers do when confronted with God's Word. They had a brief conference among themselves to come up with their answer. But that shouldn't surprise us. We know that is how fake teachers operate. When a politician who is not real action but is all talk needs a response to the crowds, they go to the polls. They try to find an answer that will not embarrass them and will not make the crowds too upset. That's what false teachers do. Instead of basing their answer off the Word of Christ and the testimony of Scripture, they base it off which way the wind is blowing. They discussed their answer among themselves and agreed they couldn't say John was sent by heaven because they'd have to then concede Jesus had the authority of heaven. And they couldn't say John was a mere man because the crowds held John to be a true prophet.

So, they gave the answer anyone keeping up appearances might give when they are stuck. "We don't know." They didn't hold this position. But they pretended to be undecided in the same way that a politician might pretend to be undecided on an issue, so they don't lose the election. Matthew records the basis for their answer, "we are afraid of the crowds." False teachers are cowards. They don't boldly make their stand on God's Word. They carefully craft their

message to their own advantage. Want to spot a fake spiritual teacher? Find one who must consult the present culture and crowds to formulate their message and theology. God's Word doesn't change with the times or conditions. Jesus was true God on that Tuesday, and he remains true God today.

Jesus proceeded to tell them a story in order to teach them an important truth regarding those who only say what they think will make them sound good but are really insincere. He tells a story of a man who had two sons and asked each of them to go and work in his vineyard that day. The first son was rebellious and flatly said, "I will not." But later changed his mind. He repented and went to work. The second son spoke what sounded good and said, "Yes, sir!" but then didn't do what he said he would do.

The lesson for us is clear. Only one of the two sons did what the father wanted. And it didn't matter what they started out with or said. What matters is how they responded in the end. One son talked big but was insincere.

Maybe some of us might at times identify with that first son. We might have turned aside from God's will and found his call to repentance changed our hearts. The person who is guilty of a sinful lifestyle abusing drugs, living sexually immoral, and despising God's Word and Sacraments can rejoice that they are still by grace invited to be his child and serve him. In repentance and faith, they have the joy of both being a child of God and serving their Father in heaven. Yes, they are guilty of rebellion and sin. Yes, their service is not perfect. But by the grace of God, they have been invited into his kingdom, despite their sin. They are forgiven. And they have a new heart. Thank God that you or others like this Son are part of his kingdom! In Jesus' day this included the tax collectors and prostitutes who were baptized by John and who believed. It includes all who have repented after refusing God's will.

But what about the other son? Do you sometimes feel like living in God's kingdom is a mere game of keeping up appearances and just saying the right thing? What good is it if you speak out against sexual immorality by decrying the immoral lifestyle of those around you but then when the door is closed you lust and fantasize about things you keep hidden in your heart? God sees it all. Should you feel good about your standing in the kingdom? Are you so sure you're keeping your heavenly Father's will? Don't be. Maybe a Christian has been a life-long member of a church and they have always spoken the right words when the pastor or Christian friends are listening, but then the rest of their time is spent with anger, vulgar words, selfish desires, and no resemblance to what they confess in church? Is that faith? Maybe you have been fighting for justice for the unborn, saying that you care about the downtrodden, but have done nothing to help young mothers, nothing to encourage or support the downtrodden. That's the second son, he speaks well but he is a fake.

Or, perhaps even worse. Maybe you have done many good things and therefore feel you don't need to repent of any wrong. You feel as if you've done enough to serve God so he shouldn't expect anything more from you. By your words you live. But by everything you've left undone you remain a phony, disobedient child.

Jesus warned his hearers that the tax collectors and prostitutes believed the authenticity of John's preaching. They repented of their sin and believed that Jesus was the Christ. But those who only tried to say good things like the religious leaders were fakes and frauds. They had not yet entered the kingdom of God because there is only one way to enter, and it is not by saying or doing the right thing. It is only by repentance and faith in the Son.

No one can say they've been the perfect child of God. No one except one. Only Christ talked the talk and walked the walk. Only he always and only spoke what was right with full sincerity. Only he did what was right every day and never had to repent of rebellion even once. He is without fault. He alone is free of any hypocrisy and failure to fulfill what he said he would do. Jesus is the real deal.

We need what is real. We need perfect and true obedience, not just the right words. That's why Jesus was there teaching the crowds on that Tuesday. He was focused on teaching them the urgent need for repentance and the great danger of hypocrisy. Nobody likes a fake. And God will not tolerate one in his kingdom.

The religious rulers couldn't believe that God's Son would lower himself in such a way. They thought Jesus was fake and refused to believe that he could possibly be the Messiah. But Jesus came to be exactly the Messiah we needed. We needed one who would carry out the Father's will.

The Father told him, "Go, do the work I have sent you to do. Be the king the world needs and fight their battles. Be the prophet the world needs and speak the truth. Be the priest the world needs and offer the perfect sacrifice for sin." And Jesus did it all. Finally, as the full stamp of approval of his authority and authenticity he fulfilled Scripture's promise that would rise from death. Alive forever he is now our prophet, priest, and king -100% real.

If the members of God's kingdom were to take a standard test on holiness, thank God we wouldn't fail. Our personal performance rating doesn't make the cut. But Jesus' does. He has founded his church. He has paid for us all. And we all have his perfect record. And he invites us to serve him in his kingdom as his redeemed people. Serve him today with a new heart and an authentic faith in him. God's kingdom is a story of spiritual sincerity. And it is found in Jesus alone.