

Lesson 8

Proper 21

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:23–32

Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowd because He deliberately fulfilled the ancient prophecy about the meek King who would come riding on a donkey. He had cleansed the temple area, driving out the concessionaires who were buying and selling there, and overturning the tables of the moneychangers.

As Jesus continued to teach in the temple courts, the chief priests and elders approached Him with their challenge: “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” Jesus, as He often did, just turned their question back to them by asking them about John the Baptist and his calling people to repentance and Baptism; they had not acknowledged John as a prophet from God. “From where did it come? From heaven or from man?” Jesus asked. When they wouldn’t give Him a definitive answer, Jesus said He would not answer their question either—which implied that He would not accept their authority to question Him. Then He told the parable of the two sons, another parable found only in Matthew, in the temple courts on Monday or Tuesday of Holy Week.

119. Jesus’ parable was aimed at the chief priests and elders, but it forces us to do thoughtful introspection too. What is the point of the parable?

120. What was “the way of righteousness” in which John came to the people? (See Matthew 3:1–2; Luke 3:7–18.) How were the tax collectors and the prostitutes like the first son in their approach to the Kingdom? How were the religious authorities like the second son? What does this parable say to us for our life as Christians?

We can readily see ourselves in the attitudes and actions of both sons. We do say no to God’s clear commands at times and then repent and try again to do His will. At other times we say a willing yes and then never get around to carrying out our intentions and promises.

121. Which do you find more difficult to correct in your Christian living, a no that resists or rejects God’s call and command or a yes that has trouble getting beyond words and good intentions? What is required in both instances? (See Galatians 5:22–25; 6:7–10.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

There is no getting away from the fact that the behavior or lifestyle of one generation influences and affects the behavior and lifestyle of the generation to follow. Sociological studies have shown that abusive behaviors such as child abuse, spouse battering, and alcohol and drug use are often perpetuated from generation to generation in a family. Those who suffered under the abusive behavior of their parents, instead of avoiding that behavior as adults, sometimes repeat it and become abusers themselves.

This is true also regarding relationship to God and the adoption of spiritual values. Parents who model Christian faith and love provide an atmosphere in which their children may grow into that faith and love for themselves. Parents who are indifferent to God may be influencing their children to a similar indifference. (See Exodus 20:3–6.)

People need to understand this principle to understand the influence that their parents, grandparents, and others have had in shaping their outlook and behavior, and they need to understand that any pattern can be changed. But sometimes people use understanding this to excuse themselves from personal responsibility instead of working to break and change unhealthy patterns.

122. How were the exiles in Babylon doing this with their proverb about the land of Israel? With what principle did the sovereign Lord respond through Ezekiel? How did the Lord make His pronouncement very weighty?

123. In what respect is the principle of individual responsibility a very positive, not a negative, principle?

124. Why were the exiles saying “The way of the Lord is not just”? What does the principle of personal responsibility say to such an attitude?

125. What was offered by the Lord through Ezekiel as the solution to the problems of those who were blaming their fathers’ sins and the Lord’s “unjustness” for their situation? (See Ezekiel 11:17–20.)

126. What does it say about God that He has “no pleasure in the death of anyone”? (Compare 18:23.)

127. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:1–18

“So if” Paul stated this in a number of ways as he brought encouragement to the Philippian Christians to grow in living as disciples of Jesus.

128. What is the basis of all the “ifs”? What were the “thens” that he suggested should follow the “ifs”?

129. Why was Paul so concerned that the Philippian Christians be one in mind and love and spirit and purpose? What happens when members of a Christian community act out of rivalry or conceit?

130. In what sense does humility lead Christians to consider others “more significant” than themselves? (See Mark 10:35–45; Romans 12:10.) What is Paul suggesting with looking “to the interests of others”? Whose attitudes are we to imitate in our perception of ourselves in relation to others?

The lofty poetic verses that describe Christ Jesus and His approach to life and service are thought by some scholars to have been a creedal statement that was already in the liturgy of the Early Church. Theologians mark this section as “a seat of doctrine.” It describes more fully than any other Scripture the state of humiliation or humbling of the eternal Word as Jesus, our Brother and Savior, and the subsequent state of exaltation of Jesus, our Brother and Savior, at God's right hand.

131. What does this section make clear about Christ Jesus from the outset?

So while these words say that the One who is in very nature God “made Himself nothing,” there is no suggestion that He lost His essential nature as God. Jesus, also in His state of humiliation, was in very nature God. But He did not fully use His power nor display His majesty as God. In humble obedience to the will of God for the salvation of sinners, He emptied Himself to take on the nature of a servant.

132. How far did His obedient service take Him? Why was this obedient servant then exalted to the highest place? What is significant about the fact that it is now the name *Jesus* that is above every name, at which every knee will bow? How is it true that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord?

133. How can we grow in developing a humble, serving attitude like that of our Lord Jesus?

134. What is suggested in Paul's writing "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"? What is the dynamic involved in this?

135. What will grumbling and questioning do to our working out our salvation?

A drink offering of wine or blood often accompanied the sacrifices offered in the temple, even those offered by others. Paul used this analogy with his "if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith." He could indeed have been executed as a result of his trial in Caesar's court. Paul wasn't worried about that, and also in that situation, he would be glad and rejoice—and he wanted his friends in Philippi to feel the same way. Paul had already turned over all control of his life and his future to his Lord and Savior.

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*Almighty God, You exalted Your Son to the place of all honor and authority.
Enlighten our minds by Your Holy Spirit that, confessing
Jesus as Lord, we may be led into all truth; through the same Jesus
Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:23–32

119. The point of the parable is that good intentions and right words are not sufficient in themselves. They must be accompanied by obedient actions.

120. The way of righteousness that John pointed to involved a sincere turning to God in repentance and faith and called for a change in behavior consistent with that faith. The tax collectors and the prostitutes had said no to God and disdained His way, but they turned to God in repentance as they heard His call through John. The religious leaders were always saying their outward yes to God in their formalistic religion, but they did not respond to John’s message and give their hearts to God in sincere repentance. This parable says to us that we should not be content with being just “believers” who say the right words and go through the proper religious forms, but should back up our believing with a discipleship that displays in action that we are sincere about our relationship with Christ. It also reminds us that we may be surprised and become resentful when people who have been living sinful lives apart from God and the Church are struck by the Word and turn to God in sincere repentance—and are fully accepted on that basis.

121. We often find it easier to deal with the negatives in our lives, the sins of commission, and bring our behavior under control, than to put the positives of Christian love and service beyond good intentions into appropriate actions. Sins of omission are easily overlooked because “we didn’t do anything wrong.” God’s Holy Spirit, asserting Himself through the Gospel of Jesus, is required both for bringing our negative behavior under God’s control and for warming our hearts to glorify God through acts of Christian service. Only He can turn us from negatives and move us into positives of a responsive love and service that puts good intentions into action. We are easily content to be just believers and not disciples.

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

122. The exiles in Babylon were surrounded by pagan influences. Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins. Their remembrance of and allegiance to the covenant were badly strained. And they were blaming it all on the faithlessness of their fathers. In effect, they were saying, “We can’t be anything but what we are because they brought these circumstances on us!” Through Ezekiel, the Lord countered with the principle of individual responsibility before the Lord. The Lord spelled out

the principle of individual responsibility very clearly and made it as weighty as possible by taking an oath on Himself: “As I live,” He said.

123. The principle takes away all excuses for negative behavior, but it also sets forth the opportunity that each person has to rise above the circumstances he has been given.

124. The attitude of the exiles in saying “The way of the Lord is not just” has been repeated many times when people wonder “Why do I have to suffer just because they . . . ” or “If God is loving, why does He allow them to bring so much suffering into our world?” Such attitudes are an attempt to evade personal responsibility, but the principle of individual responsibility asserts that we are responsible, if not for the circumstances, then for the way we react to and behave in the circumstances.

125. Through Ezekiel, the Lord told the exiles that they were to blame neither the past actions of their fathers and grandfathers nor the Lord Himself for their spiritual malaise. The solution for them was to turn to the Lord in repentance and to receive the new heart and spirit He was eager to give them. The *Concordia Self-Study Bible*: “What had been promised unconditionally (11:19; 36:26) is here portrayed as attainable but not inevitable” (p. 1253).

126. That God has “no pleasure in the death of anyone” shows His essential nature as the Life-Giver. God is holy and just and will not coexist forever with evil, but His desire for His creatures is life, not death. His mercy in Christ is His greatest glory, and He wants nothing more than for us to respond to it willingly. He lets people reject Christ and choose death, but He takes no pleasure in it.

127. This lesson emphasizes that we carry personal responsibility before God for our response to Him and its expression in our lives. We cannot blame others, and we surely cannot blame God. It ties in with the Gospel’s warning against saying yes but not living the yes, and its assurance that God is always ready to have us change a no to a yes.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:1–18

128. The basis of the “ifs” is the Gospel of Jesus. If we have encouragement in Christ, if we have comfort from love, if we have participation in the Spirit, if we have affection and sympathy, then we are to be of the same mind, then we are to have the same love, then we are to be in full accord and of one mind, then we are to do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves. These phrases describe the sanctified Christian fellowship that is built on the Gospel.

129. Other congregations to whom Paul wrote, like the Corinthian Christians, were divided over various issues. He wanted his dear friends in Philippi to avoid that trauma. When church members act out of rivalry and conceit, the fellowship is put into turmoil; members are reduced to arguing their positions and desires and separating from one another instead of working together toward Gospel goals.

130. In humility you consciously avoid unrealistic assessments of personal gifts or strengths as compared to others. Humble people look beyond themselves for opportunities to serve others and consider it only proper that the service be given. The opposite of looking “to the interests of others” might be “I’d better mind my own business”; “I don’t have time or energy to get involved”; “they made their bed; they’ll just have to lie in it”; and “surely others will be able to help them.” We are to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ both in attitude and in actions.

131. Paul made it clear from the outset that Christ Jesus is in very nature God—“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made; of one substance with the Father,” as the Nicene Creed puts it.

132. To carry out the saving will of God, the eternal Word willingly “put His crown on the shelf” and lived as one of us. His obedient service as Representative Man took Him all the way to dying for our sins, “even death on a cross.” Jesus, the God-man, was exalted to the highest place

precisely because He had obediently and successfully carried out the saving mission. It is significant that the Christ did not go back to being the fleshless eternal Word. His identification with us as our brother in the flesh was not temporary; it continues even now. It is *Jesus* (His name as a man, meaning “Yahweh saves” or “Savior”) that is now the name above every name. All of the other names by which God revealed Himself teach us something about God, but now it is the name *Jesus* that is the vital name, without which we really don’t know God and can’t live with Him. (See John 1:18; 1 John 2:22–23.) On Judgment Day, every tongue will confess “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Those who knew Him and trusted Him and followed Him in their lifetimes will find that to be the high point of their resurrection experience. Those who rejected Him or neglected Him will do so begrudgingly, but they will do it. Every tongue will make this confession to the glory of God the Father!

133. We will grow in a humble, serving attitude as our determined discipleship is continually nourished by the remembrance of Jesus’ loving servanthood and the realization that He did it for us! It is our continued involvement with Him through the Means of Grace that enables us to imitate Him in willing humility and service. Then, exercising our discipleship in appropriate service that shows love for Christ and for others is its own reward. (See 1 John 4:7–21.)

134. The Greek verb is in present tense, indicating continuing action, “keep on working.” There is always an ongoing emphasis in the requirement to “keep on seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”

135. Grumbling about what we are expected to be and do as disciples of Jesus will rob us of the joy that comes to those who serve willingly and happily dedicate their service to the One who served them first. Questioning that argues with the Lord about what He has called us to do will generally lead us to simply avoid opportunities for service that He gives us, perhaps telling ourselves, “That kind of service is not right for me. I’ll let others do it.” When we develop an attitude of grumbling and questioning, we surely will not be perceived as “lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.”