

Who has done the Father's will?  
Matthew 21:23-32

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So many of our stories in the gospels start with the Pharisees or the chief priests or the scribes or all of the above bringing some question to Jesus to discredit him. The Gospel we hear this morning is no different. Again the religious authorities are questioning Jesus. Again they are giving him a hard time. This time they want to know by what authority is he doing these things and who gave him that authority. While it is easy for us to stand in judgement of them, we should be careful because we in the church are often not so far from those religious authorities ourselves.

Let's get some context here. When the chief priests and scribes ask Jesus by what authority he does these things, we have to look at what happened before. Jesus was in Jerusalem at the temple when he saw the moneychangers to whom you had to go to exchange your money for temple money so you could buy an unblemished animal to offer for your sacrifice. It was a way to make money from those wanting to make their offerings to God. It made it especially hard for people who were just making ends meet in Roman occupied territory to worship God and the situation infuriated Jesus. So to everyone's shock, Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers and says you have made my father's house a den of thieves.

As far as the religious authorities are concerned, here comes a country rabbi upsetting the system that works well for them. However, they have to be careful because of the crowds following Jesus. I tried to think about what situation would be similar to us. Can you imagine someone showing up at our services and taking our bulletins out of our hands and throwing them down saying that we should be praying with our own words? Or saying we shouldn't be in this beautiful place of prayer and worship instead in a simple room? We would be infuriated and want nothing to do with them.

I don't give these examples to imply that this is what Jesus might do if he showed up today at our churches but rather to give a sense of how infuriating it must have been to have Jesus interrupt their status quo. The only reason they are even talking to Jesus is because he holds sway with the crowds. Jesus answers their question with a question of his own – Is the baptism of John from God or of human origin? He traps them with the whole reason they are asking their question which is to discredit him in front of the crowds. If they say from God, then Jesus will want to know why they didn't follow John. If they say human, then who knows what the crowd will do to them. They say they don't know.

And then Jesus tells a story which gets at the reason he is upset about the money changing tables in the first place. The chief priest and scribes are following God with their words but not with their actions. The story is of two sons. One who says he will not do his father's bidding but then goes and does it and the second who says he will but does not. Jesus asks which one has done the father's will and the chief priests and scribes correctly answer the first. They have gotten so caught up with their status quo

of using the money exchangers that they have lost sight that they are not doing the Father's will but in fact are going against it by hurting the people.

It is an easy thing to happen in the church. We put a way of doing things in place and it works. Perhaps it starts off by truly serving God, but despite good intentions as time goes by, God's work is forgotten or laid aside. You may have heard the old joke about how many Episcopalians does it take to change the light bulb? One answer is – What? Change the light bulb? Yep – the proverbial light bulb gets left because no one wants to offend someone or change even though the light is no longer shining from the light bulb. It is a question we need to be asking ourselves all the time – Is God's work happening in this ministry? Could it be better? Do we need to do this ministry a different way or a completely different ministry? Often the one who sees the needs for this change and gives voice to it gets treated as the chief priests and scribes treated Jesus. Who do you think you are to suggest this? Who gave you the authority?

Much of the time, the work we do is being done is with good intentions. We just haven't been paying attention to how a ministry is working or perhaps we didn't think a different way would work. Here comes Jesus asking us to take another look – to be intentional about how we do the work God asks us to do. I want to give two examples.

One is from the changes we made during Covid-19 when we started livestreaming services. It had been suggested we stream services before and I thought that given our resources which would a fixed camera streaming the service, few people would be interested. I was wrong. It took the loud voice of COVID-19 to show me a different way and to commit to keeping it even after we are back to whatever normal we find for ourselves. It wasn't that God's work could not be done without streaming the services, but that it could be done in a way to better reach more people.

The second is the discernment the vestry did when deciding which buyer to choose for the Boyd House, one of the former rectories that St. Peter's owned. I chose this example because the question of 'are we doing God's work?' ended up guiding our decisions. One offer was about 10K more than the other, but the lower offer was from someone who planned to continue using the property as a ministry to others. In the end, the vestry after much deliberation and prayer, decided that the buyer who wanted to start a ministry there was the way to go. We felt that God's work would be done with that buyer.

So I encourage you in your church ministries and also in your lives to ask that question – am I doing the will of God? Am I doing the work of God? It is a question that cannot be asked once, but over and over again, because this world and its needs change constantly. Try asking it as you go about your day even with the small things and see what happens. I don't know if the chief priests and scribes ever got what Jesus was trying to say, but I hope then when that voice comes challenging us to take a look at whether we are doing the Lord's will, that we will pause, pray and listen to how God would have us working in this world.