

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 27, 2026

Text: Matthew 21:23-32

*“By Whose Authority?”*

As Jesus entered the Jerusalem Temple, they were waiting for Him. The chief priests, Annas and Caiaphas, and a posse of the religious elders confronted Jesus. The day before, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, surrounded by His disciples, welcomed by a crowd of people, celebrated with palms, psalms, and praises. He went into the Temple and put on a disruptive display to threaten God’s judgment on the corruption in the temple markets, where sacrificial animals were bought and sold. After a brief dialogue with a few religious officials who investigated the ruckus, Jesus left the city for the night.

But the next day He was back, back in the Temple precincts, where the sons of Aaron and Levi called the shots. Jesus had begun to teach a group of people who gathered about Him. His priestly inquisitors interrupted Him. *“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”* Jesus was not a priest, yet He had turned over the tables, scattered the money and tongue-lashed some of the duly licensed merchants in the Temple. He was not an ordained Rabbi, yet He taught like one. He looked to them like an interloper or an imposter. So, they challenged Jesus.

But Jesus turned the tables on them too. He answered their question with a question of His own. He agreed to tell them by whose authority He

acted, if they would give their public judgment on the ministry of John the Baptist. Was it from God or from man?

Jesus' question put the chief priests and their supporters on the spot. How should they answer? Neither of the answers offered by Jesus seemed a good choice to them. If they said that John's ministry was divinely authorized, they knew that Jesus would ask them why they had refused to believe in him. That would be humiliating for men who counted themselves to be so unimpeachably right. The honest answer was that they had long since written off that man of the wilderness as a second-rate prophet wannabe, a religious kook who had deserved to be silenced by Herod. However, honesty, in this situation, was not the best policy, they concluded, because Jesus' audience probably still thought highly of John's ministry. These religious tough guys weren't so tough after all; they were afraid of turning the crowds against them, so Jesus' opponents punted. *"We do not know."*

But Jesus didn't accept their sneaky surrender. He reminded them that since they had not answered His question, He would not answer theirs, and He told them a parable about a father with two sons. He ordered both boys to go to work in the family vineyard. One agreed to work, but he never did, and the other refused before changing his mind and getting to down to it. Jesus asked His challengers which of the sons in the parable did the will of their father. They correctly answered that it was the one who said "no" before finally saying "yes."

Jesus followed their response with a sermon that applied the parable to the religious leaders themselves. Tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners, so reviled by these men for their failure to obey God's laws, had believed John when they heard him preach of the coming Christ. They had repented of their sins, and received his baptism for the forgiveness of their sins, in the hope of living under Christ's saving reign. Though at first, in their sin, they had said, "no", to God their Father, they turned around and said, "yes." And what of Jesus' "chosen frozen" opponents? They had arrogantly refused their God's call to repentance when they heard John preach, and they still stubbornly held to the same damning path by rejecting Jesus now.

Can you imagine being so comfortable in your own skin, so confident in your own righteousness, and so happy with your good intentions, that you consider any kind of criticism an unwarranted assault on your good name? The exchange between Jesus and His religious enemies calls us to look carefully into the reflection of Jesus' parable for a clearer view of our lives. Have we never found ourselves scandalized by people who have been caught in their crimes. "How could they do such a thing! Why, I would never!" Are we quick to reject Christians who don't believe in baptizing babies, writing them off for being less orthodox than us? The temptation to justify ourselves, to clothe ourselves in fashionable fig leaves, to say, "yes," to God the Father, while secretly saying, "well, maybe not," is

seared into our mortal hearts. We cannot remove it from them. Our pride and arrogance condemn us.

But Jesus always comes calling. The teller of the parable of the two sons is the true Son of God the Father. He came into Jerusalem to call His enemies to repentance. Though He knew that they would refuse Him, reject Him, rally the people against Him, and finally have Him crucified, Jesus came to them as the Christ. He suffered their hatred and their attacks, and He called them to turn, to confess the sin of their self-righteous arrogance, and their unbelieving rebellion against God the Father.

For Jesus, there was no “yes” and “no” in response the will of His Father, but only “yes.” What authority did Jesus have to accomplish God’s saving will? It was first publicly promised to Him after John baptized Him. From out of heaven, the Father declared, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”* (Matthew 3:15), and the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus to become sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:20), the Lamb of God whose blood would take away the sin of the world (John 1:31).

Christ’s is the heavenly authority to forgive us our sins, for He was crucified to atone for them, and He was raised from the dead to reign over us with grace and mercy. Jesus comes calling us to repent and believe His good news, and He gives us new hearts that do, hearts that turn around from seeking glory for themselves to give glory to God for His mercy.

Jesus opens our mouths to say “yes,” though we have told our Father “no” so many times.

Jesus comes calling us to live *lives of repentance and faith* lest we fall back into the sinful ways of this naysaying world. He calls to us each Sunday through His Word preached, and when we gather to read and study the Scriptures, and when we read them at home each day and respond to Him with prayers. He teaches us to recognize the deceptive influence of pride, lust, and malice in our hearts, that we may turn from them, receive His forgiveness, firmly hold His hand in faith, and follow Him in living humbly, gratefully, and lovingly. Jesus comes calling to you through His Word, so may God grant us all the grace to listen and to live with penitent confidence as God’s beloved, obedient children all the days of our lives. Amen.