

South Moreton Presbytery
Preaching Background Notes

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**Gospel Lectionary Readings for
September, 2020**

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PENTECOST 14 – MATT 18:15-20 – REPROVING ANOTHER WHO SINS

Were there discipline issues in the church of Matthew? It is especially important to note the context of the whole passage which is forgiveness and saving those who are lost. So the previous verse (14) reads (NRSV):

So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

What follows from our text is a passage on forgiveness, where it is Peter who asks how many times he must forgive, followed by a parable about the unforgiving servant; and so it is important we read about “discipline” in the context of forgiveness and restoration.

The nature of the process would suggest sins of a reasonably serious nature. Note the corporate effect of sins on the community. It can affect the entire community, thus we have pictured here, not just private matters, but issues which affect the body.

Verse 15 is similar to Lev 19:17 (NRSV):

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.

There is a responsibility of the community towards each other. The process in verse 15 preserves the honour of the offender, as witnesses are not involved. The winning back of the person straying is the important feature.

Verse 16 can be compared to Deut 19:15 (NRSV):

A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.

and 2 Cor 13:1 (NRSV):

This is the third time I am coming to you. “Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

The presence of one or two others is for the protection of the sinner. “gained” reflects the shepherd motif of v. 13.

In v. 17 the word here means literally “ignore”.

Clearly the offender is no longer to be considered a brother or sister. But how is one to behave towards one who has become a rank outsider? The kind of shunning to which Mt. 18:17 has frequently led cannot be sustained, given Jesus’ image as ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (11:19...) and given the evangelistic concern for those of other nations which Matthew firmly endorses. [See Mt 10:18; 12:18, 21; 24:14; 28:19 – also

the infant Jesus is visited by Gentile magi] The person is to be related to now as an outsider, but not as one who must permanently remain outside. The spirit to be adopted will be like that involved in the love of enemies, discussed in 5:43-48 ...¹

And so verse 17 is the end of the process (if the previous processes haven't gone anywhere), where those who don't accept the decision of the church are treated like a Gentile and a tax collector. These are the ones who need to keep hearing the Gospel. They are the ones to whom the Gospel is going out to.

It appears that the shunned brother or sister is to be treated as the object of missionary activity and to whom friendship is to be shown.

Firm action is required against a serious offence, however there is a warning that dealing with such issues can also be sinful if not handled carefully.

Throughout this process there is the concern for the community expressed but also concern for the individual involved and their welfare.

The last sentence [verse 18] promises the whole community what was promised to Peter in 16:19. In the present context, 'binding' and 'loosing' refer to the sinner, and represent conviction and acquittal". Compare with John 20:23. "... In Matthew's mind, therefore, the community is merely exercising a function that was entrusted to Peter merely as an example for all. For the Matthaean community, Peter still represents the authority that transmits Jesus' new interpretation of the Law and makes the life of the community possible in actual practice; Peter is succeeded, however, by the entire community, which draws upon his authority to determine in each new case what is sinful and what is not..."²

The community does not cause it to be binding but interprets it so.

Above all, the power to bind does not mean that an ecclesiastical inquisition can damn people for eternity... What Matthew probably has in mind is that anyone who promises salvation to another also becomes a judgment upon the individual who rejects the offer, so that the disciple of Jesus is necessarily also a preacher of judgment ... This interpretation is supported by the whole context (vss.10-14,21-22), which deals with responsibility toward one's brother, love for him, and forgiveness. There is not the slightest mention of keeping the community pure ...³

Hagner says: "What the disciples agree to on earth in disciplinary matters of the church may be taken as also the will of heaven."⁴

¹ Nolland, *Matthew*, 748.

² Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1975), 372.

³ Schweizer, *Matthew*, 373.

⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 533.

It has to do with bringing to bear on the lives of those who would be disciples the significance of all that Jesus was and brought. Having been instructed by Jesus, the church is able to prohibit and command in a manner that is backed by God himself. In the context of the attempt to bring back an erring brother or sister, the specific point will be that the church is able to confirm the standard of behavior to which the erring one is being called to conform once more. ... The one whom the church declares to be out of step with God is indeed out of step with God!⁵

This is the language of the law court. Jewish legal issues were normally decided in Jesus' day by elders in the synagogue community (later by rabbis). Many Jewish people believed that the authority of Heaven stood behind the earthly judges when they decided cases based on a correct understanding of God's law. (This process came to be called 'binding and loosing.') Jesus' contemporaries often envisioned God's justice in terms of a heavenly court; by obeying God's law, the earthly court simply ratified the decrees of the heavenly court. In Matthew 18:15-20, Christians who follow the careful procedures of verses 15-17 may be assured that they will act on the authority of God's court when they decide cases.⁶

Schweizer writes of v. 19 – “The authority of the community's words is thus the authority they gain through prayer. It is assumed, of course, just as in 7:7-11, that the community prays according to God's will, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the Lord's Prayer.”⁷ Hagner says “‘In my name’ is another way of saying ‘under my rule’”.⁸

“It can be paraphrased: ‘If two of you can come to an agreement regarding any disputed matter, that agreement will be blessed by my Father in heaven.’”⁹

While in Deut 17:6-7 the two or three witnesses should be the first to cast stones, in Matthew they are the first to pray.¹⁰

Hagner also argues:

It would be a mistake to think that in similar circumstances this procedure can be applied today, primarily because excommunication or ostracism today has nowhere near the same effect as it did in the first century, that is, in Matthew's day to be cast out left one with no other options for Christian community. Today a person may simply walk down the street to the next church or next denomination. This is not to say that the church must give up on the possibility of church discipline but simply to say that the process will take on its own character appropriate to the present-day situation... The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. And the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation in the divinely granted authority of its leaders,

⁵ Nolland, *Matthew*, 748.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, “Exegetical Insight” in William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 121.

⁷ Schweizer, *Matthew*, 374.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew*, 533.

⁹ Hare, *Matthew*, 215.

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 455.

in the promise of answered prayer in the administration of the church, and in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name. The supreme mark of Christ's community is Christ's presence.¹¹

For the Preacher

Our understanding of this passage can lean towards the end of the process when all else fails. However, the passage should be read in the hope that if something needs to be said that the issue will be resolved as quickly and quietly as possible.

The preacher could explore the wisdom of this passage when it deals with handling disagreements/conflict within the church. Do we always handle it appropriately? The passage brings together, in a positive way, justice and love.

How often do we discuss people's misdeeds behind their backs before lovingly approaching them alone in the first place? Do we consider the issue of discipline in terms of building people up and encouraging people to learn, rather than being keen to punish? The preacher may consider many church conflicts which could have been avoided or lessened if Jesus' advice had been heeded. Such issues must be handled prayerfully with care of the member always at the centre.

As I wrote this, our Moderator in his Easter address invited us to be willing to take on the sometimes difficult task of being peacemakers. Attending to Jesus' words in this passage help us to consider ways to go about this business.

The preacher may choose to explore how our congregations today can be acting towards peace.

If the preacher chooses to focus on vv. 19-20, Soards et al write:¹²

In turn, vv. 19-20 recognize that we are to be responsible in our prayers. This promise from Jesus is not the equivalent of a Christian wishing-well with guaranteed results. Historically many such prayers have gone unanswered, possibly an indication that the agreement among the people was a bad one or that the gathering was Christless, but perhaps this most indicates that Jesus' words were simply misunderstood. In fact, it may be unwise to read these verses out of their context where they are related to winning back a lost member (18:15-17) and to the responsibility to be faithful in forgiving (18:21-22).

The passage also reminds us of the corporate nature of the church, something we find hard to grasp in our individualistic age.

¹¹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 534.

¹² Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 27.

The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. And the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation in the divinely granted authority of its leaders, in the promise of answered prayer in the administration of the church, and in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name. The supreme mark of Christ's community is Christ's presence.¹³

¹³ Hagner, *Matthew*, 534.

PENTECOST 15 - MATT 18:21-35
FORGIVENESS AND THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Matthew 18:21-22

Matthew, of all the Gospels, appears to show the most interest in Jesus' words about getting on with each other, especially in the believing community. This week's passage follows closely from last week's passage (18:15-20) about reproving another who sins. Now the question of forgiveness is specifically raised by Peter. Probably here Peter is concerned about personal wrong-doing against another. Personal forgiveness, however, is key in relationships, not only personally, but also then in the wider community.

Soards et al argue, that forgiveness: "... means giving up our rightful resentment, not merely agreeing to regard others as innocent, whether they are guilty or not. Implicit in Matthew's connection of these passages is the crucial spiritual lesson that true reconciliation means the elimination of wrath."¹⁴

While vv. 15–17 have dealt with the spiritual wellbeing of an offending member of the community now we have raised a personal attitude. How should we respond if someone offends us? Jesus, in a sense, has already addressed this issue in the Lord's Prayer in 6:12 where our prayer to God for forgiveness also includes an acknowledgement of our forgiveness of those who sin against us. Jesus adds to this in vv. 14-15, following the prayer, that if we do not forgive others, neither will God forgive us.

France notes:

If a debate recorded in *b. Yoma* 86b-87a may be taken to represent earlier rabbinic teaching, a limit of three times [to forgive] was regarded as sufficient. To suggest as many as seven (the number of perfection?) would probably have been regarded as "over the top," and Peter is putting up an extreme proposal (possibly in deliberate contrast to Cain's sevenfold vengeance, Gen 4:15) for the sake of argument. In that case, Jesus' reply in v. 22 will be the more startling.

And so Jesus' shocking answer is that forgiveness is essentially boundless. If Peter is counting the number of wrongs, he is not forgiving.

Matthew 18:23-35

Again, as with other parables, we begin with "the kingdom of heaven" is like this ...

¹⁴ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 38.

The story of the unforgiving servant (unique to *Matthew*) expresses the stark contrast between the generous mercy of God and how we can respond in forgiveness of our brothers and sisters for much smaller wrongs.

The slave owed the king 10,000 talents. France writes:

A talent was originally a weight (probably about 30 kg.) of metal; when used as a monetary term without specifying the metal involved it would probably have been understood to be of silver. While the exact amount varied, a talent of silver was conventionally reckoned at 6,000 denarii. If one denarius was an acceptable day's wage for a laborer (see 20:1–15), a single talent would then represent what a laborer might hope to earn in half a lifetime. It was, at all events, a very large sum of money. Ten thousand talents (sixty million denarii; or some 300 tons of silver!) is therefore a sum far outside any individual's grasp. Ten thousand (*myria*, hence our "myriad") is the largest numeral for which a Greek term exists, and the talent is the largest known amount of money. When the two are combined the effect is like our "zillions."

There is no point in the reader trying to determine how such a massive debt could realistically accrue; the ridiculously high amount only serves to highlight the mercy of the king. The parable format makes no claim to be realistic, rather intends to shock.

While today we might be alarmed to hear that the king was entitled to sell his slave and family, it was certainly the case then. It would only go part way to pay off the enormous debt. Imprisonment for debt was commonplace, preventing the defaulter from escaping and forcing family and friends to raise money to free them.¹⁵

Seeing that he could not accept justice, the slave began to plead for mercy. The astounding thing was that the king ended up forgiving the slave the whole amount. It says that he was deeply moved with pity. Not a cent more was owing! No conditions required! This all originated in the king's pity for the slave (v. 27) and was an act of extreme grace.

Using almost the same wording, in the second half of the parable we hear of the forgiven slave's dealing with a fellow slave who owed him much less (although still not an insignificant amount – i.e. it was about 3 month's wages that was owing). As was said of the first slave, "therefore" the second slave "fell down" to ask for patience. Although the second slave's response was the same as the first's, the result is quite different as the slave is in fact put in jail.

When the forgiven slave treats his fellow slave in such a violent and unmerciful fashion, the king is made to hear about it. The master responds in anger at the behaviour of slave of whom so much had been forgiven. Indeed, he hands him over to be tortured until he could pay the entire debt, something which could not possibly happen in the foreseeable future.

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 471–477.

Note the “every one of you” (v. 35). “... none are exempt from the demand to reflect the divine mercy.”¹⁶

The parable assumes that disciples are forgiven people. So, forgiveness is God’s initiative and thus we can be expected and enabled to forgive others. The alarming thing is that this forgiveness can be lost if we, in turn, fail to forgive. “It was freely given, but it must not be presumed on. There is thus in this parable ‘a fascinating blend of the motive of fear of punishment (vv. 34–35) with the more fundamental motive of gratitude and imitation of the grace of God.’”¹⁷

For the Preacher

Regarding the interaction between Peter and Jesus about the number of times forgiveness is required, Jesus replies in a way that indicates Peter is “still thinking in terms of measurable mercy, not unlimited grace.”¹⁸ It is often very difficult for us not to count grace.

Morris writes:

Jesus does not always make an application of the truth taught in his parables, but on this occasion he does. So it does not mean “exactly like this,” but it does mean that the severity we discern in the punishment of the man in the parable is all that unforgiving sinners can look for from the hand of God. God might, of course, be more merciful than the king, but that is not the point. The point is that the man deserved no more; any unforgiving sinner, by the fact that he refuses to forgive, is inviting God to withhold forgiveness from him. Jesus refers to God here as “*my heavenly Father*,” stressing his special relationship to God and at the same time something of the majesty of God. The certainty that God will be our final Judge underlies the statement that he will *do* to the unforgiving as they have done to others. The lesson that is driven home is that the followers of Jesus must *each* (the word is important; there are no exceptions) *forgive*. And the final expression brings home the truth that we must forgive wholeheartedly, not grudgingly. It is easy to skimp on forgiveness, refraining from outward evidence of an unforgiving heart but nursing up a grudge against one who has offended us. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us” is a prayer that we must pray with due searching of heart.¹⁹

¹⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 699–708.

¹⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 699–708.

¹⁸ Soards et al, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 39.

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 471–477.

The concept of forgiveness can be a very difficult for people, especially for those who have been seriously and hurtfully wronged. Yet, personal forgiveness is still key in relationships, not only personally, but also with regard to ramifications for the wider community.

France comments: “A community of the forgiven must be a forgiving community.”²⁰

If mercy is the characteristic of God, it should be also the characteristic of his people (cf. Luke 6:36). Conversely, where God’s people do not show mercy, they cannot expect to receive it (Jas 2:13).²¹ However, given the moral lesson of the parable, it is worthwhile to also emphasise the depth of the grace of God exhibited in this parable, who forgave the whole debt without demanding that any of it be repaid. We also can be transformed by God’s powerful forgiving grace when it comes to our relationships with others. Such transformation truly comes from the heart.

The preacher may choose to explore the abundant mercy of God or how we as fallible humans can find it within us to forgive others who may have wronged us severely.

²⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 699–708.

²¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 699–708.

PENTECOST 16 - MATT 20:1-16 – THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

This parable is unique to Matthew. The opening word “for” connects this passage with the previous with its discussion of rewards. It also connects with the concept of the first and the last from the previous chapter. And so the theme of rewards continues.

The vineyard setting will also be used in two later parables in Matthew (21:28–32 and 21:33–41). The vineyard also reflects a famous parable of God and Israel in the Old Testament (Isa 5:1–7; cf. Isa 3:14; 27:2–6; Jer 12:10).

Daily workers did not have the same security as slaves and hired servants in a household, instead they needed to be hired each day. They were paid at the end of the day’s work (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14-15).

The open-ended phrase “whatever is fair” poses a question for the reader which will be unexpectedly answered in the sequel. The adjective *argos* in vv. 3 and 6 can be translated “with no work to do” and “not working” rather than by the traditional “idle,” since the latter often has a pejorative note (implying “lazy”).²²

There appears to be some urgency about getting the job in the vineyard done quickly, suggesting it might be harvest time. Harvest was often an image used in relation to final judgment and the urgency of the work of God’s Reign (cf. 9:37; 13:39).

When asked why workers were still in the marketplace towards the end of the day their reply is simply that no-one had hired them.

Hagner suggests:²³

Why is this statement made? The purpose of this insertion, which breaks the pattern of the previous hirings, is apparently to underline the fact that these are the ones rejected by other employers as unworthy. These “last” ones assume particular importance in the second half of the parable (cf. vv 8–9, 12, 14, 16). They are analogous to the tax collectors and the harlots invited into the kingdom by Jesus (see esp. 21:31). To these workers, regarded as undesirable by others, the master gives the invitation “even you [καὶ ὑμεῖς] go into the vineyard”—the same invitation given to the earlier groups.

These last hired workers certainly would expect to be paid, but only for about an hour’s work. There is nothing to indicate in the story how much they would be paid. So, finally comes the time of payment where those employed last are paid first. The workers hired towards the beginning of the day would have been surprised to see that those hire in

²² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

²³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 567–573.

the last hour were paid a full day's wage. They must have expected to be paid more when the time came for them to be paid.

France says:

The principle appears to be of payment according to need rather than desert. The complaint of the whole-day workers expresses a more conventional understanding of "reward." The comparison between their whole day of hard, hot work and the short stint of the others in the cool of the evening proves tempting to interpreters who are looking for a specific group to apply the parable to.²⁴

And so in verses 13-15 we see that no-one misses out by being a follower of Jesus. Several of the all-day workers enquire, however, about the equality of the payment. The master replies to one of them:

He addressed him as "*Friend*," a form of address used in this Gospel only in friendly remonstrance (22:12; 26:50). On his side there was no malice or hard feeling; the man who had worked for him all day was his friend. Then he pointed out that there was no injustice: "*I do you no wrong*." When a man makes a solemn agreement and keeps to his side of the bargain, there should be no thought of injustice. This man had made a legal agreement with his workmen; they would work for a day, and he would pay them a denarius. That was what they did and what he did. Where is the injustice? The fact that he chose to be generous to other people gave these men no new rights. Their discontent was due to envy, not to the overlooking of any of their rights.²⁵

The "last ones" in the parable did not deserve what they were given. Their pay, equal to that of others, depended purely on the will of the lord of the vineyard. The shock of the parable is often the learning moment. We expect justice but fortunately we receive grace. "The God who is generous far beyond what could be expected is also never less than just. But to think in terms of contractual obligations is to miss the point of the kingdom of heaven. God's "goodness" (cf. 19:17) is far more generous than that."²⁶

Regarding verse 16, Hagner offers that this last saying

... brings the parable to an end (note οὕτως, "thus") by focusing attention on the reversal wherein the last are made first and the first last. It thus repeats the logion of 19:30 but alters the order so that here the last are appropriately referred to before the first. The point does not concern the time when the disciples, who are certainly to identify themselves with those who have worked the whole day ... will receive their reward, i.e., after those who came later, but rather the fact that those who come last,

²⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

²⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 499–505.

²⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

the “unworthy” (cf. v. 6b–7a), will receive a reward equal to that given the disciples. ... The last are thus not the last in time but the last in rank, i.e., in terms of worthiness. Thus the parable and also its concluding logion have the effect of underlining the impropriety of the disciples’ question in 19:27. The fundamental assertion of the parable is that God’s grace is granted also to those who come last. Those who come to work in the vineyard after the twelve, even those who come in the eleventh hour, the unwanted and the unworthy, will receive before the disciples the same reward to be given the disciples. In this sense the last will be first and the first last. The surprise of this reversal is similar to that referred to in 19:30, where there is more emphasis on the “first.”²⁷

For the Preacher

Morris notes:

This is a very important parable. It is possible to interpret it in terms of Israel and the Gentiles.... The vineyard is often used as a symbol for Israel (e.g., Isa. 5:1–7); those who take the parable this way argue that Israel is like the men who worked all day, while the Gentiles are symbolized in those who came later and were admitted by God’s grace. Others point out that there is always a tendency for those who have been followers of Christ for a long time to be suspicious of those who come later. This applies to Jews and Gentiles, but it also applies to the Twelve and to later believers, and it is not difficult to see this tendency at work in the church of all ages. The parable warns us that priority in time means little. But it seems better to interpret the parable as putting emphasis on the truth that God acts in grace toward us all. There is a tendency in the human race to think of salvation in legal terms. There is no heresy as widespread as the one we can put simply as “If I live a good life, I will go to heaven when I die.” It is natural for us to think that we can earn our salvation. But the consistent teaching of Scripture is that we are sinners; we all fall short of the standard we ought to have attained, and thus we have no claim on salvation. But as in this parable the workers who came late had no claim on a full day’s wage though they got it, so sinners have no claim on salvation. Salvation is always a work of grace. That God does not treat us on the basis of justice is a fact for which sinners must be truly grateful. The parable emphasizes the place of grace (eleven twelfths of what the last comers received was unearned!).²⁸

What do you think? France offers: “The blessing of eternal life is the same for all. There are not some more saved than others.”²⁹

²⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 567–573.

²⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 499–505.

²⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

We may choose to reflect on our possible attitudes of stinginess towards the idea of God's grace, and how we may come to be more willing recipients of this same abundant grace for ourselves. Such a grateful attitude can spill over into our attitudes towards others.

PENTECOST 17 - MATT 21:23-32
BY WHAT AUTHORITY? THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

Matt 21:23-27 – By What Authority

Earlier in this chapter Jesus has failed to silence his supporters as he enters Jerusalem, he has overturned the tables in the Temple, he has cured in the Temple, and now, as he is teaching in the Temple, he is approached by the religious leaders and asked by what authority he does these things. A fair-enough question, but are these people in authority for Temple affairs feeling threatened? This is the group which will soon be responsible for judging Jesus' for his execution.

Jesus offers a reply by asking them a question, relating to the authority of John the Baptist. John and Jesus are certainly connected strongly in the Gospel accounts, and John was seen by many as a prophet (see 3:1-4, 11-12; 11:2-19). Some even saw Jesus as another John (14:1-2; 16:13-14). It will be stated a few verses later that John certainly came "in the way of righteousness" and that he wasn't believed by all. So should people believe Jesus comes "in the way of righteousness"? Thus, indirectly, Jesus is claiming his authority also as coming from heaven (a reverential way of referring to God).

As John's authority to call people to repentance is treated with respect in *Matthew*, so too has Jesus' authority been acknowledged throughout the Gospel: In his teaching, his forgiveness of sins, his healing and his empowering his disciples (7:29; 9:6; 8:8-9; 10:1).³⁰ Jesus will specially claim this authority as he commissions the disciples (28:18).

This device of answering a question with another one was a commonly used feature in rabbinic debate, where the second question opens up the subject further. (See also 14:3 and 22:20).

France writes:³¹

The dilemma of the questioners is not an intellectual one—their view of John seems to have been clear enough—but tactical, involving the danger of "loss of face". To voice their true view of John would have exposed them to popular anger, but to give an insincere answer would expose them to ridicule, since their rejection of John's message was well-known, as Jesus will confirm in v. 32. While there is some ambivalence about the popular response to John as Jesus describes it in 11:16–19, the presupposition is that they went out to him as a prophet (11:9), even if his style of prophetic ministry proved not to be to their taste. John's prophetic image is confirmed in 16:14, and his popular appeal, already mentioned in 14:5, is presupposed in v. 32.

³⁰ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 245.

³¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 796–807.

Although someone today might interpret the “discussion” solely about “loss of face”, the listener of the day would fully recognise that Jesus is claiming that his ministry continues that of John and that both are truly of divine authority. If they are unable to perceive John’s authority, they cannot accept Jesus’ authority.

Matt 21:28-32 – The Parable of the Two Sons

The parable of the two sons and the following material highlight the reversal of expected roles, demonstrating the surprising nature of God and those who follow. The current religious leaders may expect some sense of priority, yet Jesus warns them that tax collectors and prostitutes are coming into God’s reign ahead of them – a concept that would have been abhorrent to these leaders.

Does this mean that Israel from now on will be rejected by God? France offers:³²

Seen in the light of Matthew’s distinctive development of this theme, the statement (in Matthew only) that the kingdom of God will be taken away from “you” and given to “a nation” that will yield its fruits (21:43) might be read as a manifesto for the total rejection of Israel and its replacement by Gentiles But that is a good deal too simple. The vineyard, after all, represents Israel, and the vineyard remains to produce its fruit after its original tenants are evicted. The tax-collectors and prostitutes who will go first into the kingdom of God (21:31) are presumably as Jewish as the establishment they replace. What is envisaged seems to be more than merely a “régime change,” but less than a total repudiation of Israel as the people of God. What appears to be in view is rather a reconstitution of Israel, such as we saw outlined in 8:11–12, with new and unexpected members drawn in to replace those rejected by their lack of faith, but with a recognizable continuity with the OT people of God.

Jesus’ reference to John the Baptist’s ministry illustrates the importance Jesus saw in this mission.

The vineyard has been used in Isaiah 5 as a symbol of Israel. Here the symbolism could also be applied to doing work for God among God’s people. It appears that Jesus is implying that the religious leaders are not just being inconsistent, but they are failing to do the work that God has asked them to do.

France writes:³³

The Jewish leaders (like the second son) claimed to be living in obedience to God’s law, and kept themselves strictly apart from those who (like the first son) made no such

³² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 796–807.

³³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 796–807.

claim. It was Jesus' interest in such "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 15:1–2) which gave rise to another parable about two sons (Luke 15:11–32). In this gospel the "underclass" of Jewish society have also been described as "tax collectors and sinners" (9:10, 11; 11:19), and on two occasions the Jewish tax collectors have been even more dismissively linked with Gentiles (5:46–47; 18:17). The substitution of "prostitutes" here for either "sinners" or "Gentiles" gives an even more offensive comparison, especially in so male-dominated a society as first-century Palestine. These are the people whom the "chief priests and elders of the people" would most despise and most heartily thank God that they were not like (cf. Luke 18:11). They had no place in respectable, religious Jewish society—how much less in the kingdom of God. So when Jesus speaks not only of their entering God's kingdom but also going in there *first*, he is making a no less radical pronouncement than when he spoke of Gentiles coming into the kingdom of heaven to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while the "sons of the kingdom" found themselves outside (8:11–12).³⁴

The repentance and its appropriate "fruit" which John demanded according to 3:7–10 matches closely the Matthean sense of "righteousness." John came to show people how to live according to God's will, and those who "believed" him repented and were baptized. They included especially the less respectable members of Jewish society, for whom repentance was an obvious need, and perhaps for that reason his message was resisted by those who already considered themselves "righteous" (cf. Jesus' own mission according to 9:12–13).³⁵

For the Preacher

There is a Gospel challenge here to accept the authority of Jesus and as Jesus asks the religious leaders to respond, so we too are asked to respond to that authority for our lives. What are the implications for accepting the authority of Jesus? Can we simply rest with the concept that Jesus was a good teacher, or is there more about Jesus and the source of his authority? Such authority can be empowering for those who follow Jesus.

What is our understanding today of those who seemingly are unworthy to be part of God's joyous realm, and yet who are coming in ahead of the more "worthy" members of society?

Regarding the parable of the two sons, those who claim to be fully obedient to God, but can't see the new things God is doing, are compared to the son who said he would, but didn't.

Hare writes:

³⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 796–807.

³⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 796–807.

Christians too can become blind to what God is doing in the world around them. How easily 'church work' degenerates into little more than simply maintaining the institution, with no excitement concerning what God's active grace is doing and consequently no enthusiasm for evangelism and renewal! We say that we are going to work in the vineyard, but instead of harvesting the grapes we spend our time rearranging the stones along the path!³⁶

Soards et al make two suggestions for preaching:³⁷

1) Look at the parable apart from the setting provided in Matthew. Verses 28-31 tell a story that can have more applications than one – as is usually the case with parables. Jesus declares that what really counts with God is what you do, not what you say. Simply talking the right line is inadequate. In fact, those who merely say the right things are not found to do God's will. On the other hand, what you say doesn't preclude you forever from doing God's will. A genuine change of heart is more than a possibility, Jesus says it actually occurs. To those who have refused God's directions, this parable comes as the good news that real change does take place. The past doesn't determine the future. A bad decision or a hastily spoken word does not eternally set you outside God's good graces. A call refused can be reconsidered.

2) After the parable proper, the second part of v. 31 makes a strong statement that the Christian community needs to hear on occasion. Jesus reminds us that people who are genuinely unconcerned with God can often be caught up in the fresh movement of the Spirit more easily than persons who are comfortably religious and, therefore, genuinely insensitive to the movement of the Spirit in their midst. Sometimes the wrong kind of religion is more dangerous than no religion at all. Rigid, self-righteous piety can thwart genuine devotion.

³⁶ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 248.

³⁷ Soards et al, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 62-63.