

COMMITTED, EFFECTIVE, FAITHFUL WORKERS
Men's Bible Study at Park View
March 8, 2005
Matthew 21: 23-32

- Religious leaders challenge the authority of Jesus
- Jesus responds with a question of his own

The religious leaders who rejected the authority of Jesus, correctly identify which son in the parable does what the father wants. Then Jesus holds up a mirror, in the form of the parable, to help them see they were playing the role of the disobedient son. They claimed to be faithful in obedience to God, but they didn't seem to understand that "authentic obedience includes responding in faith to what God is doing." (Hare)

It is in character for the religious leaders to reject Jesus since they earlier rejected John even after they witnessed the repentance, belief and baptism of the tax collectors and sinners.

They are an example that there is more hope for those who are consciously wicked than the self-satisfied. They were outwardly correct and righteous and said the right words, but they seemingly had no desire or intention to obey the father's request. But in His loving care, Jesus left the door open for them. He didn't say the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God instead of you: He said they are entering ahead of you.

Douglas R. A. Hare says, "Christians too can become blind to what God is doing in the world around them. . . We say we are going to work in the vineyard, but instead of harvesting the grapes, we spend our time rearranging the stones along the path."

This is the part I would like to focus on a bit. During the month of February I read two books. The one was written by Colman McCarthy, who is passionate about promoting non-violence, pacifism and conflict management. He talks about spirituality and casually mentions Jesus along with Gandhi and other persons with remarkable commitment and influence for good.

The other book was written by a churchman and author who is well known internationally. This author was also a passionate skillful communicator. He also quoted the Bible on nearly every page. I gained many insights and challenges reading this book. But I also knew that he held positions that in my understanding are inconsistent with the character, spirit, teaching and example of Jesus. There are other places where his rationale for a position does not seem to be totally consistent.

The following is one example: He says, "The Bible says that all people, not just believers, possess part of the image of God; that is why abortion and murder are wrong." Yet I have heard him defend the war in Iraq. Doesn't the image of God in the tens of thousands of people killed there matter?

Who here is more faithful to Jesus? This question is not a matter of either/or, but both/and. Without Jesus at the center of our lives we can never be all that God wants us to be. However, truth is more than propositional. Truth goes beyond credal statements and is incorporated into transformed minds and lives.

We should not immobilize ourselves with constant introspection, but I believe it is important to keep our minds open, to listen, think, learn and grow regarding what it means to be committed, effective and faithful workers in God's Kingdom.

Our conversations together need to be with grace, respect and genuine caring; not with the attitude that we have it all together. Years ago I came across the following: "No one can always be right and still be alright." We need to hold our beliefs and understandings with humility.

I have good Christian friends whose understandings are quite different from mine. But it is important for us to learn and grow as we discuss issues. McCarthy says, "We may not always see eye to eye, but we can always talk heart to heart."

In this parable we have an invitation to an exciting adventure to be partners with God in the work of His Kingdom. May God lead us together by His Spirit to live as committed, effective and faithful workers.

Questions for Discussion

Are there areas of understanding, insight, commitment and experience from our heritage that we can share with the larger Christian community? If so, how can we share in ways that are appropriate and effective?

Are there areas that we as Christians have allowed our thought and practice to be influenced in a negative or limiting way by the larger North American society and culture?

Are there areas in my life where I say, yes I will go and work, but don't quite get it done? Do some of my values, attitudes, priorities, choices and activities lead me out of the vineyard or keep me busy rearranging stones along the path?

How should we as Christians respond to the culture wars?

For Reflection and Discussion

- "The failed opportunity to do good becomes an evil." Dr. James Peterson, professor of Theology and Ethics said that "too often Christians fail to do good because they fear they will do wrong."

- "To live in love is the whole meaning of life in the Kingdom of God." See Micah 6:8 & Mark 12:30, 31

—*Laurence Sauder*