

## Changed to the Perfect Child

### Matthew 21:23-32 (NIV)

<sup>23</sup> Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>25</sup> John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’” <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>28</sup> “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’” <sup>29</sup> “I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

After a challenge of authority from the chief priests and the elders of the people, Jesus tells them a story about two children. A father goes to one child, one son, and told him to go today and work in the vineyard. The child’s answer was a defiant, “I will not!” but later he changed his mind and went. (verse 29) The father went to his other child and gave the same instructions to go today and work in the vineyard. This second child answered affirmatively and respectfully, “I will, sir,” but did not actually go. (verse 30)

Which one did the father’s will? The chief priests and the elders of the people rightfully answer Jesus’ question that the first child did. Yet, neither was the perfect child, were they? The first one was defiant, abrasively declaring that he did not want to go and work. The second child gave the answer that father wanted to hear but never actually did it. Something needs to change for both children. The first one needed an attitude change. The second needed a change in action.

Where do you see yourself between the two children? Do you think that you need more of an attitude change, that there are things that you know God wants you to do and you defiantly say, “I will not!”? Thinking of our recent Bible readings in worship, do you think or say, “I will not!” to God’s commands to let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, to speak only what is helpful for others, to build them up? Do you say, “I will not give up anger, slander, my grudge”? Will you not forgive as you have been forgiven? Will you not be the watchman like Ezekiel and call someone out on their sin, warning them of it, so that you can point them away from their destruction and instead to Jesus? Do you not want to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

Do you find yourself more like the second child, that you heard God’s Word over the last few weeks and said, “Amen!”, affirming your desire to do God’s will, that you are only going to speak things that build people up, that you are going to forgive as God forgave you, that you won’t hold on to grudges, that you will call people out on their sin, that you will deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus, but have you actually done those things? Do you have the right words but always find a way of talking yourself out of actually doing what you know is good and right? I mean, we are really good at rationalizing and justifying why we aren’t doing what God commands of us, his will. This is no good. We’re not the perfect child. Our attitudes and actions need to change, but how?

There was an amazing change taking place through Jesus’ teaching. Everyone could see it, but Jesus had to bluntly remind the chief priests and the elders of that change. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” (verses 31-32)

Basically, the elders and the chief priests had the right words. They said that they were going to do the will of the Father, but they didn’t actually do it. The tax collectors and the prostitutes, they defiantly said, “I will not!” to the Father’s will. But something changed. Later, they were sorry for their attitude, turned around, and went and did the will of the Father.

What accounts for that change? John showed them the way of righteousness. Down by the Jordan River, John preached a message of repentance, that people should turn from their sins. He told the Pharisees, some of whom were chief priests and elders, to turn away from their sins and produce fruit in keeping with repentance, to do God’s will instead of sin, to not just say that you follow God but actually do it. He told people to turn from being selfish to instead being selfless, sharing clothing and food with those who have

none. He told tax collectors not to collect any more money than they were required to. He told the soldiers to be content with their pay, not to extort money from people or accuse them falsely for bribe money.

So, is that all that's needed to be done? Just point out what people are doing wrong, and they will fix it, turn it around? Sadly, just telling people what they are doing wrong does only that: points out their wrong. It doesn't actually fix them. Pointing out wrong in and of itself does not change an attitude or an action. If it did, the Pharisees, the chief priests, the elders would have changed their minds too and did God the Father's will, producing fruit in keeping with repentance, like the tax collectors and the prostitutes did.

There was more to John's preaching, more to the way of righteousness than just pointing out wrong and telling them the right thing to do. John also proclaimed the kingdom of God, that God was coming into this world in order to live perfectly for us in our place and to take all our sins on his shoulders. This is why John pointed out Jesus to all the people gathered there, saying, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Jesus humbled himself to take on our flesh and blood in order to be our servant, doing the Father's will for us perfectly in our place and then humbling himself to become obedient to death – even death on a cross. Jesus took my sin and your sin on himself. By his blood shed for us, we are saved from the wrath and the death that we deserve because of our sins, of our times when our attitude defiantly declared that we will not do God the Father's will and all the failures to actually do the Father's will. Jesus was and is the perfect child who gladly said that he would do God's will and readily did it. John pointed to Jesus as the way of righteousness, the way we become the perfect child before God, that it was all based on what Jesus did for us in our place as that perfect child.

Knowing the righteousness that Jesus accomplished for you, how does that change you? Seeing Jesus humble himself and be our servant, does that make you stay in your position of defiantly declaring, "I will not do the Father's will!"? Or does it soften your attitude, change it that you want to respond differently when he tells you to do something, that out of thankfulness and gratitude, I want to do God the Father's will? Seeing Jesus humble himself and become obedient to death, even death on a cross, does that make you want to stay in your position of saying that you will do the Father's will but still come up with reasons not to do it or that you can't be bothered to change your actions? Or does Jesus' sacrifice for you start to change what you do, that it now lines up with saying that you will do the Father's will?

With Jesus having made you the perfect child by his righteousness, what changes are you making? What attitudes toward the Father's will do you want to change? What actions that you're doing now do you want to change to instead line up with the Father's will? Will you focus on speaking on what builds up, what is beneficial? Will it be giving up the anger, rage, slander, and every form of malice? Is it forgiving that person that you have held a grudge against, forgiving them as you have been forgiven in Christ? Will you now actually pick up a phone, put a date on the calendar, to give the warning of a watchman, pointing out someone's sins to point them to Jesus, the perfect child who is our righteousness? Will you now take up the attitude and deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

Even being made the perfect child by God, we will still be tempted to not want to do the Father's will and tempted to not actually do it. Sometimes we will give in. When we do, we are not lost causes, like how some people thought the tax collectors and the prostitutes were. No, like them, having been shown the way of righteousness that Jesus lived for us, we hold to our identity that we have been made perfect children of God. This changes both our attitude and our actions when it comes to the Father's will. Amen.