

Lesson 8

Proper 21

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:23–32

Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowd because He deliberately fulfilled the ancient prophecy about the meek King who would come riding on a donkey. He had cleansed the temple area, driving out the concessionaires who were buying and selling there, and overturning the tables of the moneychangers.

As Jesus continued to teach in the temple courts, the chief priests and elders approached Him with their challenge: “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” Jesus, as He often did, just turned their question back to them by asking them about John the Baptist and his calling people to repentance and Baptism; they had not acknowledged John as a prophet from God. “From where did it come? From heaven or from man?” Jesus asked. When they wouldn’t give Him a definitive answer, Jesus said He would not answer their question either—which implied that He would not accept their authority to question Him. Then He told the parable of the two sons, another parable found only in Matthew, in the temple courts on Monday or Tuesday of Holy Week.

119. Jesus’ parable was aimed at the chief priests and elders, but it forces us to do thoughtful introspection too. What is the point of the parable?

120. What was “the way of righteousness” in which John came to the people? (See Matthew 3:1–2; Luke 3:7–18.) How were the tax collectors and the prostitutes like the first son in their approach to the Kingdom? How were the religious authorities like the second son? What does this parable say to us for our life as Christians?

We can readily see ourselves in the attitudes and actions of both sons. We do say no to God’s clear commands at times and then repent and try again to do His will. At other times we say a willing yes and then never get around to carrying out our intentions and promises.

121. Which do you find more difficult to correct in your Christian living, a no that resists or rejects God’s call and command or a yes that has trouble getting beyond words and good intentions? What is required in both instances? (See Galatians 5:22–25; 6:7–10.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

There is no getting away from the fact that the behavior or lifestyle of one generation influences and affects the behavior and lifestyle of the generation to follow. Sociological studies have shown that abusive behaviors such as child abuse, spouse battering, and alcohol and drug use are often perpetuated from generation to generation in a family. Those who suffered under the abusive behavior of their parents, instead of avoiding that behavior as adults, sometimes repeat it and become abusers themselves.

This is true also regarding relationship to God and the adoption of spiritual values. Parents who model Christian faith and love provide an atmosphere in which their children may grow into that faith and love for themselves. Parents who are indifferent to God may be influencing their children to a similar indifference. (See Exodus 20:3–6.)

People need to understand this principle to understand the influence that their parents, grandparents, and others have had in shaping their outlook and behavior, and they need to understand that any pattern can be changed. But sometimes people use understanding this to excuse themselves from personal responsibility instead of working to break and change unhealthy patterns.

122. How were the exiles in Babylon doing this with their proverb about the land of Israel? With what principle did the sovereign Lord respond through Ezekiel? How did the Lord make His pronouncement very weighty?

123. In what respect is the principle of individual responsibility a very positive, not a negative, principle?

124. Why were the exiles saying “The way of the Lord is not just”? What does the principle of personal responsibility say to such an attitude?

125. What was offered by the Lord through Ezekiel as the solution to the problems of those who were blaming their fathers’ sins and the Lord’s “unjustness” for their situation? (See Ezekiel 11:17–20.)

126. What does it say about God that He has “no pleasure in the death of anyone”? (Compare 18:23.)

127. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:1–18

“So if” Paul stated this in a number of ways as he brought encouragement to the Philippian Christians to grow in living as disciples of Jesus.

128. What is the basis of all the “ifs”? What were the “thens” that he suggested should follow the “ifs”?

129. Why was Paul so concerned that the Philippian Christians be one in mind and love and spirit and purpose? What happens when members of a Christian community act out of rivalry or conceit?

130. In what sense does humility lead Christians to consider others “more significant” than themselves? (See Mark 10:35–45; Romans 12:10.) What is Paul suggesting with looking “to the interests of others”? Whose attitudes are we to imitate in our perception of ourselves in relation to others?

The lofty poetic verses that describe Christ Jesus and His approach to life and service are thought by some scholars to have been a creedal statement that was already in the liturgy of the Early Church. Theologians mark this section as “a seat of doctrine.” It describes more fully than any other Scripture the state of humiliation or humbling of the eternal Word as Jesus, our Brother and Savior, and the subsequent state of exaltation of Jesus, our Brother and Savior, at God's right hand.

131. What does this section make clear about Christ Jesus from the outset?

So while these words say that the One who is in very nature God “made Himself nothing,” there is no suggestion that He lost His essential nature as God. Jesus, also in His state of humiliation, was in very nature God. But He did not fully use His power nor display His majesty as God. In humble obedience to the will of God for the salvation of sinners, He emptied Himself to take on the nature of a servant.

132. How far did His obedient service take Him? Why was this obedient servant then exalted to the highest place? What is significant about the fact that it is now the name *Jesus* that is above every name, at which every knee will bow? How is it true that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord?

133. How can we grow in developing a humble, serving attitude like that of our Lord Jesus?

134. What is suggested in Paul's writing "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"? What is the dynamic involved in this?

135. What will grumbling and questioning do to our working out our salvation?

A drink offering of wine or blood often accompanied the sacrifices offered in the temple, even those offered by others. Paul used this analogy with his "if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith." He could indeed have been executed as a result of his trial in Caesar's court. Paul wasn't worried about that, and also in that situation, he would be glad and rejoice—and he wanted his friends in Philippi to feel the same way. Paul had already turned over all control of his life and his future to his Lord and Savior.