

## Psalm 78

### God's Goodness and Israel's Ingratitude

<sup>1</sup> Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

<sup>2</sup> I will open my mouth in a parable;

I will utter dark sayings from of old,

<sup>3</sup> things that we have heard and known,  
that our ancestors have told us.

<sup>4</sup> We will not hide them from their children;

we will tell to the coming generation

the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,  
and the wonders that he has done.

<sup>12</sup> In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels  
in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

<sup>13</sup> He divided the sea and let them pass through it,  
and made the waters stand like a heap.

<sup>14</sup> In the daytime he led them with a cloud,  
and all night long with a fiery light.

<sup>15</sup> He split rocks open in the wilderness,  
and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

<sup>16</sup> He made streams come out of the rock,  
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

### Matthew 21:23-32

<sup>23</sup> When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" <sup>24</sup> Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup> Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' <sup>26</sup> But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

### The Parable of the Two Sons

<sup>28</sup> "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father<sup>[a]</sup> went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

The chief priests and elders – that is, people with authority – are very interested in the authority Jesus has and how the heck he came to get it. ‘By what authority are you doing these things,’ they ask, ‘and who gave you this authority?’ What these things are, and whether or not they benefit the people Jesus is teaching is of no concern. What matters is who has the power to do such things.

We tend to see the world has having a particular order, a set structure, spoken and unspoken rules. Everyone and everything has its place and its role.

Such a construct gives us access to power and a recognizable status, but it can also trap our thinking. Notice how flummoxed those with authority are by Jesus’ question, and how much of their own fear they reveal in not answering.

Living inside a system, we may not be consciously aware of the games we play. Yet we instinctively calculate the algorithms. The priests and elders don’t reflect honestly on the question Jesus asks; they focus on what the result will mean for them: ‘if we say *x*, then this will happen; if we say *y*, then this will happen.’ Afraid of how their response will affect their status and their own authority, they attempt a non-answer. They freeze, they are trapped, they do not want to change the way things are.

Vince Lombardi, the great pro football coach of the 1960s, had a saying about giving up: "Winners never quit and quitters never win."

Stirring words, for sure.                      But wrong.

All through history, winners have quit one thing and moved on to another.

Matthew tells us that Jesus "left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea," where he began his ministry (4:13).

Simon Peter and Andrew quit fishing and followed Jesus (4:20).

Saul quit "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" and became an apostle (Acts 9:1-22).

And the quitting has continued, right up to the present day.

Abraham Lincoln quit being an owner of a general store and entered politics.

Julia Childs quit being a CIA intelligence officer and became a world-famous cook.

Harrison Ford quit being a professional carpenter when he was offered a part in a little movie called *Star Wars*.

"Grandma" Moses quit selling potato chips and began to paint ... at age 80.

Clearly, quitters sometimes win, *when they discover the upside of giving up*.

In the parable of the two sons, Jesus tells a story to the chief priests and the elders of the people -- a tale of a man with a couple of sons who are needed in his vineyard. This father goes to the first and says, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." The son doesn't want to alter his plans, so he answers, "I will not."

But later he changes his mind, quits what he is doing and goes out to work.

The father goes to the second son, makes the same request, and the second son answers, "Sure!" In his enthusiastic response, he seems like a real winner. But he fails to go out and work in the vineyard (v. 30).

So, Jesus asks, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (v. 31). Which one is the real winner?

"The first," answer the chief priests and the elders. They grasp that the son who quits what he is doing and goes out to work in the vineyard is the real winner.

Discovering exactly what you need to do is the upside of giving up.

"Truly I tell you," says Jesus to the religious leaders, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you" (v. 31).

"What?" snort the chief priests and the elders. "People like that can't be winners."

"For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him," explains Jesus, "but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him" (v. 32).

But the chief priests and the elders? "Even after you saw it," says Jesus, "you did not change your minds and believe him" (v. 32). The priests and elders were so sure that they were winners that they did not see the need to quit what they were doing, change their minds and believe him.

Often it is the quitters, the ones willing to change, who lead the way into the kingdom of God

Within the context of the larger story Matthew tells, the chief priests and elders are more like the second son. Trapped by conventions, they get caught up with *saying* the right thing without demonstrating the freedom to *do* the right thing.

The chief priests and elders know which son 'did the will of his father,' but they still need Jesus to point out that those without the pretense of moral or social authority (tax collectors and prostitutes, in this case) may hold a certain advantage.

Afraid of losing power and privilege, those in authority will often freeze and do what is safe, what will maintain the status quo. The tax collectors and prostitutes, on the other hand, are able to judge John the Baptist on his words and his witness, not on what their belief about him might do for their status.

Now you are possibly thinking "OK I get it, but I don't have any power"

But we do, and we are instinctively protective of the structures that provide us with the lifestyle, opportunities and privileges which we enjoy.

We are therefore often unaware of how difficult it is to have our minds open to change. Higher up on the social ladder, we may be further away from the kingdom of God.

When Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter heaven" He was not just talking about money. We are rich in so many ways.

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the temple came to question his authority.

Jesus sensing that they are trying to trap him, answers their question with a question. The priests and elders argue with one another, and discover that rather than trap Jesus, they are the ones who are trapped.

These religious leaders cannot see a good path forward.

They should rethink their direction and consider the truth of what Jesus is teaching.

They need to discover the upside of quitting.

But they do not. Instead of giving up and changing course, they remain stuck on the path they are on, one that will lead them to plot the death of Jesus (26:3-4).

As for Jesus, he refuses to answer their question about authority because they do not answer his question about authority. They have to quit what they are doing in order to discover that Jesus does have authority -- authority to teach, to heal and even to forgive sins.

The same choice faces each of us. What do we have to quit to discover the truth of Jesus?

As the Psalmist says:

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incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
- <sup>2</sup> I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
- <sup>3</sup> things that we have heard and known,  
that our ancestors have told us.

Amen