



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 21:23–32

Gospel of Matthew

“The Authority of John and Jesus”

TRANSCRIPT

If you were asked what is the first mark of the Spirit-filled community—translated that means, what is the first mark of a Christian church?—what would you say? This past week, I was reading an article by Mr. John R. W. Stott, a very well-known British Bible teacher. The article was entitled, “Our Sovereign God and the Church,” and in the midst of it, he had a paragraph on the first mark of a Spirit-filled community.

And he went on to point out that the first mark of a Spirit-filled community was probably a mark that very few people would have chosen. If you were asked that question, what would you say? Well, according to Mr. Stott, very few of us would have replied, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine,” and he went on to point out that the characteristic mark the first mark of the early Christian church, as Luke puts it in Acts 2:42, they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine. In other words, they devoted themselves to the studying and to the learning of the things the apostles saw.

And of course, that is one of the reasons in Believers Chapel we have always felt that it was proper to place the Word of God first in our emphasis, and that everything should really be gathered around that. It is our desire, I’m sure it is your desire for the Chapel and your desire for yourself, individually, that you have the first mark of a Spirit-filled person, and it is that we continue steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles. So we are going to read the Scriptures, and then we have

the exposition of the Word of God, because we do believe that this is the preeminent thing in the ministry of the Word of God in the local church. So I am asking you now to turn with me to Matthew 21 and listen as I read verses 23 through 32. Matthew 21:23 through verse 32:

“And when he was come into the temple the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?’ And Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where was it? From heaven or of men?’ And they reasoned with themselves saying, if we shall say, ‘From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.’ And they answered Jesus and said, ‘We cannot tell.’ (Literally the Greek text at this point says simply we do not know.) And he said unto them, ‘Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.’ (Will you notice that statement? Particularly the Lord Jesus speaking to them, neither tell I you by what authority I do these things. Now to illustrate what he has been trying to say and what he will say in the next section, he asks them a question) ‘But what think ye? A certain man had two sons and he came to the first and said, son, go work today in my vineyard. He answered and said I will not, but afterward he repented and went. (Incidentally the word repent here is really the Greek word, regret, but it is obvious from the context that this regret is a regret that encompasses true repentance, because it involves contrary action.) But afterward he repented and went and he came to the second and said the same and he answered and said, I go sir and went not. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They say unto him (that is the Lord Jesus) the first. Jesus said ‘Verily I say unto you the tax collectors and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness and ye believed him not; but the tax collectors and the

harlots believed him and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.”

May God bless this reading of his Word. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Our heavenly Father, we come to Thee in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we give Thee praise and thanksgiving that we are able to gather in this auditorium another Sunday morning, the Lord's Day, to continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and then labor in the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers.

We are grateful to Thee Lord for all of the blessings which Thou hast showered upon us. Truly thou hast been good to us, and we are grateful, and we are thankful. We pray, O God, that our understanding that Thou has done for us may deepen and grow so that our gratitude may deepen and grow, for we know that we are not nearly so grateful for the blessings of life as we should be. If we truly understood what Thou hast done for us our gratitude should be much deeper than it is.

We thank Thee for the Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and have loosed us from our sins through the shedding of his own atoning blood, and we thank Thee that the cost of this great redemption is a cost that has been borne by our triune God. We thank Thee Lord that Thou hast given us salvation through the Lord Jesus, and we praise thee for all of the blessings of life that have come as a result of the possession of that life that is life indeed.

O Father we do pray for each individual in this auditorium and those who are listening through the television. We pray O God that through the ministry of the Word there may be response to the things that are found in Holy Scripture, and if there are some here who have not believed in the Lord Jesus may today be the day when they come to trust him.

We pray for our country. We pray for Thy blessing upon it, for our president, for the governor of this state, and for those who are associated with them in the government that touches our lives, and we ask, Lord that Thou will enable these men to think in the way that Thou would have them to think and act in accordance with Thy plans and purposes. We are so grateful, Lord, for

the knowledge that Thou art a sovereign God who in providence controls the affairs of this entire world.

We remember the words of Holy Scripture that Thou doest work all things, in the counsel of Thine own will, that the king's heart is in the hands of the Lord and he turns it with it whatsoever he will, and so we praise Thee and thank Thee for that assurance.

We ask, too, Lord Thy blessing upon the entire church of Jesus Christ, not only the churches with we are most in sympathy and the knowledge of Scripture, but all of those true Christian churches, we pray O God, that Thou bless them richly, and today might be the day for spiritual advance for the whole body of the Lord Jesus. We commit this meeting to Thee and also Lord the meetings that follow this evening. May Thy hand be upon us for spiritual good.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for today is “The Authority of John and Jesus.” It is Tuesday of our Lord's last week upon the earth. The triumphal entry into the city has taken place. A second cleansing of the temple has been accomplished. The cursing of the fig tree is over, and our Lord comes into the temple with quite assumption of authority in order to teach.

Now it is very evident from the account as we have it here that the Lord Jesus gave the impression of being a sovereign king. This of course is what he was claiming to be. He claimed to be the king who was bringing the kingdom of Israel, and the thing that seems to stand out is the authority in which he was carrying out his ministry. He is truly, and he thought to present himself as a sovereign king.

Many of you know that I came to faith through Donald Gray Barnhouse, and Mr. Barnhouse has told a story of an incident in his childhood which bears upon the things that I am saying here right now. He grew up in California in the early part of this century, the later part of the last century as well, and Dr. Barnhouse was therefore living in the days in which there were very few automobiles and practically no airplanes, and so when the subject of the armed forces of the United States was discussed, they were in large discussion of the cavalry.

He said when he was a boy that they were enthralled by service in the cavalry, and I do remember that even up to a generation ago, young men did feel that one of the most glamorous parts of our service in our country was the cavalry. He said he once had a visitor who was an officer of the cavalry come to his house, and they were speaking over the relative merits of the branches of the service, and finally the cavalryman said the most important thing in the entire armed forces of the United States is a cavalry general, and the next most important thing is a cavalry colonel, and the next most important thing is a cavalry major, and after that a cavalry captain, and then a cavalry lieutenant, and then a cavalry sergeant, and after that, a cavalry trooper and then after that, a cavalry trooper's horse. And he said after that there is nothing. And after that there is nothing, and then there is a general of the infantry. [Laughter]

And Dr. Barnhouse went on to say as he told this story that when we come to the doctrines of the Word of God, there is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and after that there is nothing, and after that there is nothing, and then after that, there are the doctrines of the attributes of God and the work of God, and after that there is nothing. And after that there is nothing, and then after that there are the doctrines by which the churches are divided, the doctrines about how the churches should be governed, and how the form of the sacrament should take place and other such matters.

Well, I'm sure that we would probably want to argue with Dr. Barnhouse about the sovereignty of God being necessarily the most important doctrine. There may be other doctrines that would challenge that, such as the holiness of God, but I am sure that most of us would agree that one of the most significant doctrines of the Word of God is the sovereignty of God; the sovereignty of God in his conduct of the affairs of this universe and particularly the sovereignty of God in our salvation.

So the Lord Jesus entered into the temple, and I am sure that there must have been about him the sense of a sovereign king, for immediately the Israelite leaders come to him and ask him about authority. The tragedy of the first coming of the Lord Jesus is of course the unbelief of Israel, and more pitiable still than the unbelief of Israel is the fact that with their bareness of the knowledge

of the truth, they had also a clamorous and vociferous protestation of orthodoxy. It is bad enough to have no truth, but it is worse to have no truth and then in the midst of the bareness and lack of truth to make claims loud claims, large claims for orthodoxy.

And so the Lord Jesus was ministering to this attitude, and so he came into the temple and he saw all of those people in the temple who were carrying on business in the temple, and so he threw out those that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers in order to get over the fact that in the temple there should be carried on the worship of God. Then he cursed the fig tree which Alfred Plummer called “The Braggart Fig Tree” with its perfusion of leaves but no fruit, and by this Lord Jesus sought to teach that Israel was making great professions of fruit, but there really was nothing on the tree at all. And so the Lord Jesus was seeking to minister to what he considered to be the need of the nation.

He will tell three parables, one of which we will look at, the parable of the two sons, today, but then he will tell two more in order to stress the fact that Israel has made an empty profession that can only lead to divine judgment. Sovereignty, I have said, suggest authority, so it is not surprising then that the Jewish authority challenge him for accepting the hosannas of the crowd and the hosannas of the children and then come to him and say what right do claim for yourself these hosannas that come from these ignorant children, and from these provincials who come down from the north with you, and that is the situation with which the section we are to look at opens.

He was evidently preaching in one of the porches of Solomon’s temple—for that is what is meant when it says, when he came into the temple. The chief priests and the elders and the scribes—one of the other passages tells us the scribes were there, too—they came to him while he was teaching, and they said to him, “By what authority doest thou these things and who gave thee this authority?” So they ask about the nature of this authority, by what sort of authority are you doing the things that you are doing, and who gave it to you—what’s the source of it? As if they were to ask him, do you have political authority? Is it by virtue of political authority that you are doing these

things? Is it some form of social authority that you have? Is it spiritual authority? Show us your credentials, in other words.

Now that is an amazing thing, because the Lord Jesus has been performing miracle after miracle which were his credentials, and yet these unbelieving leaders still come to him and ask him, in effect, show us your credentials. When you read the Lord’s answer, you might at first think that this was an evasion, because he doesn’t answer their question about authority. He doesn’t say, God gave me this authority, because he knows that lying back in these questions of theirs is an attitude, and this attitude that they have goes back to a historical situation. And so he asks a counter question in order to throw them back upon themselves, so to speak.

So he said to them, I’ll also ask you one thing. If you tell me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. So the counter question is designed to bring them to the conviction that well, what we have done is we have failed to respond to the revelation of God that is given to us, and if we had properly responded to John and his ministry, then we would know the answer to the question about authority.

As a matter of fact, do you remember that John, when he came, preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and as all Israel streamed out to him, all of Judaea streamed out to him, they heard John preach this message. They heard John say that he himself was not the Messiah, but he was the forerunner of the Messiah, and as a matter of fact, he was so unworthy in the light of the true Messiah, that he was not even worthy to stoop down and tie the shoestrings of the sandals of the Messiah when he came. I baptize you with water; he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. But the leaders did not respond. And so the question then is a question that is designed to bring them to face with the issue of their response to John the Baptist.

And when he said, if you tell me why this would be, if they were responding properly the moral indicator of the proper attitude toward him, but if they will not answer the question about the source of John’s ministry, then it is useless for him to go on to tell them about the source of his authority because the source of his authority is the same as John’s.

You see, John was saying, in effect, I am not ministering by my authority. I am ministering as one who is under God, and I am telling you about someone who is going to come who is also to be under God, so if they had responded properly to John’s ministry, then they would know that John came from God and that the ministry of the Messiah also was a ministry from the Lord.

I am reminded of that text in the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John in which the evangelist says there there was a man sent from God whose name was John, so that John was sent from God, and he proclaimed his message from God, and also he gave from God the message concerning the Messiah. You can see the reason the Lord Jesus asked this question is because the unbelief of these leaders began with that official ministry of John the Baptist. So he takes it right back to the place where they had disobeyed.

Well having said to them, I’ll ask you one thing, if you tell me I will tell you by what authority I do these things, the baptism of John was it from heaven or was it from men, well, that answer of our Lord throws them into internal confusion. We read they reasoned with themselves. What a beautiful illustration this answer of our Lord is of the statement Paul quotes from the Old Testament in 1 Corinthians 3:19. There he said, “Remember he (God) taketh the wise and their own craftiness.

So these leaders, these religious leaders, these men, who were the equivalence of ordained men today, they had come to the Lord Jesus and craftily asked him by what authority he was doing these things, seeking of course to get him condemned and ultimately to get rid of him.

But now, by the words that our Lord has spoken to them, they are cornered, and so these religious beasts are plunged into vain reasonings, and ultimately have to dishonestly reply, we don’t know. In the final analysis for them, truth is no real concern, it is the consequences of evading it that are their particular concern. They don’t stand off and say now, what is the truth? By having their minds closed to the truth, they say, what are the consequences if we say from heaven? He’ll say, why didn’t you believe then? If we say, it’s of men, look, there’s all these people out here, and they



thought John was a prophet and they will turn on us, so the only thing that comes to their mind is how shall we evade the truth. The truth itself is of no concern to them.

Incidentally, do you ever get into a position like that have you ever found that in your own experience when you face the facts of the Word of God, the thing that has been really prominent in your response to it is, how can I evade this? There are many ways in which we may evade by vain reasoning, but we cannot escape, ultimately. The Lord Jesus is not here to condemn us to our faces, but ultimately the Holy Spirit is present and he convicts us. You can be sure that when we are faced with the truth, if we reply like these men, we will be internally in confusion and consternation.

And isn't it striking, too, that these men, who are the leaders, actually fear the people? Think of that. Afraid of the people because of what they might do. That is characteristic of men, though, isn't it? We are so fearful of standing for truth because of what it might mean in our daily lives. Fear.

Did you know around the country in the United States you can go into many hotels which have a tenth floor, eleventh floor, the twelfth floor, the fourteenth floor, the fifteenth floor, the sixteenth floor? Did you know there are many of the hotels around the United States that do not have a thirteenth floor? You know why? Because people are so superstitious and fearful, they don't want to stay on that floor. So what do we do? Well, we number our floors, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, as if putting the number fourteen on the thirteenth floor will make it the fourteenth. It's still the thirteenth. [Laughter] It's still the thirteenth, even though it is fourteen or eighteen or eighty four—it's still the thirteenth. You cannot escape it. Fear.

The New Testament tells us, when our trust is in the Lord, what have we to fear? We may not fear people, we may not fear anyone if our trust is in the living God. Whatever our experiences of life are, they are nothing, if our trust is in the Lord God. Well our Lord's reply to them is, I'm sorry, since you don't know, then, I am not going to tell you by what authority I do these things. What a cruel reply.

Now I want to point out a couple of things that I think are important here. First of all you will notice that evidently since they had not responded to the ministry of John the Baptist, no further

life is being given to them. In other words we find here the principle that obedience to the light that we have is necessarily for further light in the Word of God. I do believe that is the principle. I believe that God deals with all of us, and he gives us guidance, and he gives us enlightenment, and as we develop and grow in the Christian life he will seek to confront us with certain truths of the Word of God. And if we respond, we have further light. But if we do not respond to the light that he gives us at stages in our Christian life, then we stay there, and it will always be the Holy Spirit will bring us back to that point at which we had been disobedient.

Now I think that is also true of those who are not Christians, too. They have heard certain facts of truth. All of us have, even those who have never been in a Christian church, have been confronted with certain aspects of God’s truth, and if we refuse the light that has come to us, we will always be brought back to that. But when we respond to the light that we have, then further light is given.

It is evident that these men remained in chapter 3. They were still back there in the ministry of John the Baptist, and not having responded to him, they had not been given any further light, so when they asked by what authority you are doing these things, he just says, lets go back to chapter 3. How did you respond to John the Baptist?

Will Rogers used to say, “American history could be divided into three ages. There is the age of the passing of the Indian, and then there is the age of the passing of the buffalo, and then there is the age of the passing of the buck,” [laughter] and we are living in that age, he would say. Well you know you can do that in spiritual things, and that is exactly what had been done here.

I love that little passage in Elijah in which Elijah, with a great deal of courage, because I know that it cost him quite a bit, came into the presence of King Ahab of Israel and said, Ahab there is not going to be rain for three years except at my word. Now that took a great deal of courage. Suppose I were to go to Washington, get in the presence of the president, and then lay down some word of national judgment before him—that would take a great deal of courage. And we read in the

very next verse after Elijah has responded obediently to the message of God, and the word of the Lord came unto him. Having responded in one respect, further light was given to him.

Now the second thing is a very difficult thing, but it's evident when the Lord Jesus said, since you are not telling me the answer to my questions, I am not going to tell you the answer to your question, it is very evident that silence is often the best answer to the questionings of unbelief, and that is difficult isn't it?

Now that is a biblical principle. Did not the Lord Jesus say, “Give not that which is holy to the dogs?” Did he not say, cast not your pearls before the swine? That is exactly what he is doing here. He is saying, since you have not responded to the light that you have had, then I shall not respond to your question. He isn't saying, now wait, I've got a good opportunity here, and could have pulled out the “Four Spiritual Laws” and talked about them and introduced them to the nature of his authority and who gave it to him. But it was useless. He knew that a blinded mind and a hardened heart cannot respond to truth, and so he refused to answer. That's a biblical principle. Sometimes silence is the best answer to the questionings of unbelief. Our Lord is the greatest illustration of this.

Well now, having said this, he moves on to discuss by an illustration the situation in Judaism at this time, and this passage, incidentally, is connected with the preceding, because in verse 32 he says, for John came out in the way of righteousness and you believed him not, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him, and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward that ye might believe him, so it is evident that this next illustration has a great deal to do with this ministry of John the Baptist. It is a very simple little story, incidentally.

It's a story about a man who owned a vineyard, and he had two sons. And to one of the sons, he came and he said, son I want you to go and work in the vineyard today. And the son answered, I will not. But afterward Jesus said, he repented and he went and worked.

Then he came to his second son, and he said, so I want you to work in the vineyard today, and the son said, I go sir—the Greek text simply says, I sir, (we can supply, go) or I will sir, but he

went not. Then the Lord Jesus said, which of these two men did the will of the father? Why it's so simple even the Pharisees and scribes and the lawyers can understand that, and so they say the first, the one who said I would not, but then afterward repented and went, whereas the other one who made all of these professions and professions but who did not go, was disobedient.

Now in order to understand what he means by this simple little story, we have to make some identifications and of course, identification, I think, is rather relatively simple. The vineyard represents the kingdom of God, because in verse 31 Jesus says unto them, verily I say unto you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. Son, go work in my vineyard and the Lord Jesus in the statement of application says the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you, so the vineyard represents the kingdom of God.

Now the first son, what does the first son represent? Well, in verse 29, this first son is one who said, I will not, but afterward he repented and went, and in verse 31 we read, verily I say unto you, that the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you, so it's evident the first son who obeyed represents the publicans and the harlots.

Now what does the second son represent? Well that is clear. It's clear I think the second son represents the self-righteous leaders. They are the ones who said, I will, with great professions of orthodoxy, but they didn't.

Now I want to make an application or two here, because I think it's not only valid but needed. Let's think for a moment about this first son and the publicans and the harlots, because the first son, the obedient son, is the one who said, I will not but then repented and went. These are people who are validly disobedient to God among the Jewish people. Those that were the most commonly identified as sinners were the publicans the tax collectors who were oppressive in their taxing, and then the harlots who were obviously immoral. And so these are those who are validly disobedient to God.

They are those who make no professions of orthodoxy. They are those who are honest unbelievers. They are like the people, you know, who say, I will not serve God. I will not serve the

Lord Jehovah. I will not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, because I don't believe in him, and furthermore, I will not make any professions of faith when I do not have any faith. I will be perfectly honest and open. I will not be a hypocrite. I do not believe in serving the Lord God. So you say, I will not attend upon the meetings of the saints on Sunday because I'm not a saint. I will not pray because I do not believe that there is a God. All of this is a weariness that is intolerable to me. I will not sing the praises to my maker, because I do not acknowledge him as my maker. In fact, occasionally you will have people say, at least I am honest in what I believe.

Now I would like to say, that is an admirable thing, of course, to be honest about your unbelief. It's certainly more admirable than being deceptive about it. It is certainly more honorable to say, I am an unbeliever. I do not acknowledge the existence of God in heaven. I do not acknowledge the existence of the Christian faith, or that there is such a person as Jesus Christ. It is much better to do that than to make profession and have no reality, but I suggest to you that that doesn't mean that kind of person is an admirable kind of person.

Let's suppose we have a man on the platform today, and I call over here and I say, what do you do sir? Well I'm a thief. A thief, that's kind of bad isn't it? Well I want you to know that I make no professions of being honest at all. I am a thief. Now professions of honesty in thievery does not do anything for the man. He's still a thief and so the man who does not respond to the ministry of God is still an unbeliever; he still is a man who abides in the judgment of God. And he may be more righteous than the man who deceptively refuses to give the condition of his heart as he should, but he's still what he is, an unbeliever.

Now it is possible, of course, that man may have some other ideas about why he does that. He may say I do not believe because I do not understand the Christian faith. I don't understand the deity of Christ. I don't understand the atonement. I don't understand the resurrection. I do not really think in such a way that I can believe. Now of course, that is a little better, but let us remember this: that as far as understanding of the faith is concerned, no one understands perfectly the faith. As a matter of fact, if we had to understand everything, we couldn't live. There are ten thousand things

that we do not fully understand. I do not understand you and you do not understand me. As a matter of fact, many of you out in this audience have been in love with your husband, or wife as the case may be, or maybe you are in love with someone who is not your husband or wife, and you hope that they are, but you do not understand love—who understands love? But we believe in it.

There are lights in our fixtures here which we see are turned on, but not a single person in this auditorium fully understands electricity. Sooner or later even the most intelligent of us and the most trained would have to say, well, beyond that I cannot go. In the final analysis even our scientific knowledge is knowledge that we accept by faith. So we cannot, if we say, I must understand in order to believe, we cannot ever believe.

Perhaps you think well—I make this by applications—perhaps you say, well I’m an honest unbeliever, because I just don’t think there is any hope for me. Well I want you to notice that little statement, but afterward he repented. It is possible for a man who is honest in his unbelief in his rejection in the truth of God to afterward come to repentance. And I think one of the most beautiful illustrations in the Word of God is the illustration of that man, one morning after the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, rode out of one of the gates of the city of Jerusalem with a company of men about him, and as he went out, he turned and looked over at Golgotha, and he shook his fist at Golgotha, and said, we will get you you hated Nazarene who have been destroying Judaism!

And as he made his way toward Damascus, the Lord Jesus appeared to him, and this man who had said, I will not, I will not, who—perhaps at the stoning of Stephen, because he took part in the stoning of Stephen—God had said to him, son, go work in my vineyards, he said, I will not, I will not, I will not, but on the Damascus road he saw the Lord Jesus, and he said, Lord what will thou have me to do? Afterward, he regretted. He went and worked in the vineyard and worked as hard as anyone else has in the kingdom of God.

Well then there’s that second son. And that second son is of course representative of the self-righteous leaders. One of the striking things about this passage in verse 32 is when the Lord comes to the concluding statement. He says, “When John came unto you in the way of righteousness

and you believed him not.” Now that’s bad. That is their first no, when John the Baptist came and preached and said, “Prepare for the coming of the Messiah, they said, I will not. I will not. But then he goes on to say, he believed him not. But the tax gatherers and the harlots believed him, and he when he had seen it, repented not afterward that he might believe him.

In other words, they not only said no, when John the Baptist came there with his ministry, but as John the Baptist continued his ministry, and as this vast multitude of people composed of tax collectors and harlots—incidentally, that tells us a great deal about the make up of those five hundred plus believers through the ministry of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. They were not high echelons of society, but they were filled with the extortionists and the immoral harlots.

But they saw them streaming into the knowledge of God that was transforming their lives, and these wicked leaders, even though they had rejected John as they saw the effects of John’s ministry, and the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and the great transformations that were taking place in the lives of men, they still did not respond. They still kept saying, I will not, I will not. Well of course, then, the second son represents these self-righteousness leaders. All the time they are saying, I go sir, because they were making professions. I go. They were probably as religious as these pews in this auditorium and just as least likely to get to heaven as those pews.

They were saying, constantly, I go. I worship. You know, they were like people who attend church on Sunday morning at 11 o’clock. The minister opens the Word of God. They open their Bibles. He reads to the Word of God. They look at the Word. He says, let’s pray. They bow their heads. On Sunday evening they attend the meetings. During the week, they frequently attend the meetings. During the week, when they are in their work, and the subject of religion comes up, they say, I believe in God. A great deal of people believe in God. They rarely ever say, not only do I believe in God, but I believe in the God who is the Father who is the Lord Jesus, for there is no other God. You never find them objecting when people say, I believe in God.

But wait a minute. To believe in God is not sufficient. Mohammadeans believe in God. The Hindus believe in God. You never find them saying, one must believe in Jesus Christ and him alone

in their business in order to be saved. They are filled with, I go sir, I go sir, I go sir, but as far as the reality of response, they are like John Bunyon’s trees, which were green on the outside, but when you cut into the trunk of tree, it was all dry as tinder and was useful only for burning. Have you ever noticed the difference between an oak and a willow? An oak is a very strong tree. An oak is the kind of tree that can only be uprooted by a strong gale. But you can uproot a willow. It bends with the gale. If it is strong, the willow just bends a little more. That is the man who said, I go sir, I go sir, but he went not.

Now I conclude with just a couple of lessons that appear as a result of this particular parable that the Lord Jesus did or gave. It is obvious in the case, first of all, of this first son, that there is illustrated here the need to put away pride regarding sin. This son who said, I will not, but then repented and went, made no excuses for his sin. And there is no need for us to make excuses for our sins when he comes to God.

But secondly, it is one of the major points in this parable that we have a need that belief should behave in accordance with our belief. Moral standards today are still valid, even in the midst of today’s miasma of relativity. There is a story of a Scottish elder who was going to take a trip to the Holy Land, and he was very thrilled over it. The trouble with this elder was he was really a disagreeable person around the church, and so when he told the minister he was going to the Holy Land. He said, not only am I going to the Holy Land, but he said, I got a copy of the Ten Commandments, and I’m going to climb Mt. Sinai, and from the top of Mt. Sinai I’m going to read the Ten Commandments.

The minister said, I have got a better idea. He said what? He said, stay home and do them.  
[Laughter]

You know, we make these loud professions of orthodoxy, but it is extremely significant that these professions make these realities. And finally, I want you to notice one last thing here. Will you look at that word in verse 31 before you, that prepositional phrase, verily I say unto you, the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you? Now you know, I think from this



story, you might have expected the Lord Jesus to say the publicans and harlots are going into the kingdom of God instead of you. But he didn't say that.

He said, before you, which leaves the door open, and you can see that even here in the midst of their sham and pretense and hypocrisy, we still have an unlimited invitation to faith in the Lord Jesus. The publicans and harlots—true, they have precedence over you now. They have already gone into the kingdom of God before you, but it's before you and the promise still remains for you. You have lost the precedence, but not the promise, and for open neglectors and nominal followers of the Lord Jesus, that is a promise the Word of God contains.

Jonah 2:9 says, “Salvation is of the Lord.” The New Scofield Bible has a very interesting little remark by that. A little comment says simply this: “the theme of the Scripture” and that's right—the theme of the Scripture is, salvation is of the Lord. If you are here this morning, and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, we urge you as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus to reflect upon the atoning work that our Lord has accomplished. He has made it possible for publicans and harlots to enter into the kingdom of God through that atoning work.

He has made it possible for those open neglectors and those nominal neglectors of the truth of God to be saved, and it is possible for you through the saving work of the Lord Jesus to have the assurance of the forgiveness of sin and of everlasting life, and we urge you this morning in the light of the things that Jesus Christ has accomplished, that you come. Come in the midst of your shame and your pretense and hypocrisy to the reality of a salvation through faith in him.

May God enable you to come, and if there are some here who are honest objectors, we invite you, too. It's nice that you are frank and bold and not hypocritical, but nevertheless, the gospel is for you, too, and you can come out of your honest rejection through faith in the Lord Jesus, for in the final analysis, you too are lost. May God speak to your heart. Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these lessons that have come to us from the Word of God and which speak to us and our needs. So often, as Christian believers, have been

hypocritical—full of sham and pretense—and we know, Lord, that in the final analysis, it is not our protestations of, I go sir, that count, but the repentance, obedience, to the Word of God.

And Lord, we particularly pray for any who may not have come to the Lord Jesus as their Savior, so work in their hearts and lives that they may believe in him, in whom to trust is everlasting life.

May grace, mercy, and peace go with us.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.