

Matthew 21:23-32

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And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"²⁴ Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things."²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'²⁶ But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet."²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'²⁹ And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went."³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go."³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you."³² 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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

"The honeymoon doesn't last forever!" I think we all know what that means. A newlywed couple finds themselves in the happiest state of their lives, never could they imagine *anything* but unconditional love for their spouse. But sadly, after a while, some of those feelings start to fade, the daily stressors start to seep into their marriage, and if they're not careful—tempers flare, angry words are exchanged, and feelings are hurt. It's a sad truth that the people we spend the most time with are the people against whom we sin the most. You see, the tendency of sinful human hearts is to resist the love of the ones who love us most of all.

We can see this in every stage of life. This happens among angsty teenagers who often rebel against the parents who love them dearly, saying, "They don't understand me, they don't love me!" Parents can fall into this trap too, busying themselves so much with work or their cellphones that they give no time to their children and are probably much less patient with their own family than they are with just about anyone else.

And did you know there's another close relationship that you have in which resistance is your deeply-rooted response? I'm talking about you and me and our regular resistance to the love of God.

Mankind has done this since the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve set the example for us and chose to resist God's love and rebel against His good and gracious will. And we often do the same, don't we?

In our text today, Jesus is warning the Chief Priests and the Scribes about this sinful attitude. He tells them a simple parable to show that they actually *were* resisting God and His love. And then He tells them just how pointless that resistance is. We would do well to listen to this parable and apply it to ourselves also. The theme we'll be considering today is:

Resistance (Against God's Love) is Futile

- I. False Obedience is Resisting God's Love
- II. Resistance Cannot Change God's Love

Before we get into the parable, it would be good to understand the Pharisees' view of Jesus. Their first confrontation with the promised Messiah actually happened before Jesus officially stepped onto the scene. It took place in the wilderness, and it was with John the Baptist that they interacted. John had been preaching about the coming Messiah, leading people to repentance and baptizing them. The Pharisees wanted to see what all the hubbub was about, so they too went out to the wilderness to listen, but John called them out when they arrived! He pointed to them and said, **"Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."** (Matthew 3:7-9)

John was calling them out as hypocrites because they did not trust in God for righteousness, rather they figured they were acceptable before God because of how they lived and because they were descendants of Abraham. No doubt this confrontation was highly upsetting to the Pharisees. Later, Jesus would arrive in the wilderness where John was preaching, and this time John would point and name Him the **"Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."** (John 1:29) You have to imagine the Pharisees present did not understand what that *meant*, but they *certainly* didn't like it.

And as Jesus grew in popularity and gained followers, the Pharisees' hatred of the only Christ grew. Hundreds and then thousands of people were flocking to Him to see Him heal the lame and the blind and the deaf and the demon possessed. *Multitudes* gathered to hear His preaching because, as Matthew tells us, **"He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."** (Matthew 7:29) Ultimately, their hatred spilled over when they realized that Jesus was not just claiming to be a prophet speaking from God. Rather, He was claiming to speak with the authority of God Himself. And this was the last straw for the Pharisees; this was blasphemy in their eyes. Jesus needed to die.

So that's the background to our text where we find these Pharisees once again questioning the authority of Jesus. Jesus was teaching in the temple one day, and they wanted to shut Him up. But Jesus saw right through their question and taught them a lesson. His goal was to show them that their **False Obedience was a Resistance of God's Love**. He told them a very simple story. There's a father with two sons. The father asks the sons to go and work in his vineyard. The first son said that he would *not* do so, but then he felt bad and worked. The second son said that he *would* go to work but then did not. What point is Jesus trying to make? Not that we should be like either of these sons, but rather that actions speak louder than words. More important than talking the talk is walking the walk.

And this was the great flaw with the Pharisees. They sure talked like they could walk the walk. They believed and talked as if they could keep God's Law to a T, "Everything God has commanded, I've kept it all!" They could *talk* like that, but they could not back up their lofty talk with *action*. In other words, even though they *acted* like they were perfect, they were sinners just like everyone else.

And really, that was the reason why God gave His Law in the first place, wasn't it?—to help everyone realize that they were sinners in need of a Savior. But when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai and Moses presented this law to the people, their response was, **"All that the Lord has spoken we will do."** (Exodus 19:8) But they did *not* do what God had spoken, any more than you or I have. Just like that second son who said he would go work in the vineyard and did not, the children of Israel said they would keep God's holy law and they failed—just like the Pharisees and like us.

The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, **“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”** (Romans 3:20) God gave us His perfect law *not* so that we would find any sort of confidence that we were walking on the straight and narrow as good Christian people according to it, but so that we could realize how utterly hopeless our salvation is apart from God’s gracious forgiveness. This was the point that the Pharisees failed to understand. The Pharisees believed they could live holy as their Father in heaven was holy. They thought they would get to heaven simply because they were the chosen descendants of Abraham. They were the young son saying, “I will go do the work, Father,” but then failed to do so. They thought they were obeying God, but it was a false obedience.

And false obedience is simply resisting God’s love. God says through the Apostle John, **“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”** (1 John 4:10) So often when a Christian passes away, we will frequently say something to the effect of, “It’s ok, I know she loved the Lord.” “I know he’s in heaven, because I know he loved the Lord.” I think many of us have said those types of things before, but do you see the problem with those statements? Is anyone in heaven because *they* loved the Lord. We so often *overrate* our love.

And we overrate the things we do. We compare our church attendance to that of others and feel awfully good about ourselves. We present ourselves as being really rather righteous, and then we fail to follow through when no one’s watching. We look at people fallen into sin and rather than being moved with compassion to help them, we often simply feel better that, “I would never do anything like that.” If this is the type of love that we have, do we any business going to heaven on the basis of our love? Could any of us say, “I know I’m going to heaven, because I love the Lord.” No, we can’t. We have no business feeling that way. Though we often think we’re obeying the Lord, at least compared to others, this type of attitude is a false obedience. This attitude indicates that come Judgment Day, we’d rather be judged on the basis of *our* love, rather than God’s love for us. It’s all just an effort to resist God’s love and to find confidence in our own overrated love instead.

Thankfully, there’s a better way to talk at the death of a Christian. Instead of saying, “It’s ok, I know *she* loved the Lord,” it would be much better and bring much greater assurance to proclaim, “It’s ok, I know *the Lord* loved her.” That’s the same thing we can say about ourselves, “I know I’m going to heaven, not because I love God, but because God loves me and gave Himself for me.” Though we often try to **resist God’s love through our false obedience, our resistance is futile**. Because **our resistance cannot change God’s love for us**.

Earlier we tried to gain the Pharisees’ perspective on Jesus so we could understand where they were coming from. For the most part, they hated Jesus. And still to this day, we think of the whole lot of them—the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Priests, the Sanhedrin—we think of them all as enemies of Jesus. But now, we should look at this relationship from a different viewpoint and consider instead what *Jesus* thought of *them*. They hated Jesus, but Jesus still loved them. He was working for their salvation, even as they questioned Him and accused Him of blasphemy. Just as He had forgiven prostitutes and tax collectors, the sinful dregs of society who had turned to Jesus in repentance, so Jesus was prepared to forgive these men as well. Even as He was nailed to the cross, He prayed, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”** (Luke 23:34)

They viewed Him as their enemy, but Jesus loved His enemies. Jesus loved the Pharisees and chief priests, just like He loved his disciples, just like He loved tax collectors, just like He loves you and me. And Jesus' love cannot be stopped. **Resistance against His love is futile.** Throughout history we see countless peoples and nations trying to resist God's love and thwart the plan of salvation. But from Adam to Noah to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to David and Solomon, to that little town of Bethlehem and that lowly stable, the Love of God charged on in Jesus Christ.

Even when the devil tempted Him for forty days, the love of your Savior marched on. Even when confronted by demons and politicians, the love of your Savior marched on. Even when challenged by his enemies and friends, the love of your Savior marched on. Even when facing forsakenness from the Father Himself, the love of your Savior marched on, *for you.*

You know, one thing that is often misconstrued about this love of God is that He just overlooks our sin out of love. People use the love of God as an excuse for all sorts of ungodly lifestyles today, saying, "God is a God of love! I know He still loves me anyways!" But that's just using God's love as an excuse to keep on sinning. When Jesus came dining with tax collectors and prostitutes, when Jesus said they would get to heaven before the Chief Priests and elders of the people—He was not saying that He approved of their lifestyle. Nor was He just overlooking their sin. But He knew what He was about to do to take care of their sin.

God could not overlook their sin anymore than He could overlook your sins. But in love, He provided the solution, the life of His own Son Jesus Christ. And Jesus, carrying the sins of greed and theft and dishonesty for those tax collectors, carrying the sins of adultery and lust for those prostitutes, carrying the sins of hypocrisy for the Pharisees, and carrying all of your weighty sins, He marched on to the cross, and once and for all He crucified them there.

And now Jesus comes to us today with the authority of God assuring us of forgiveness. God Himself declares, "Your sins, though many, are forgiven." As guilty as we have been of resisting God's love, *still* God shows His love to us. And that means there is nothing you can do to change God's love. No matter how hard you may have resisted Him in the past, God's forgiving love is unchanging. No matter how often you have committed a specific sin in the past, God's forgiving love is unchanging. No matter how terrible your sins may have been, no matter how much you've been convinced they can't be forgiven, God's forgiving love is unchanging.

Yes, God's love is the most powerful force on earth. The apostle Paul once wrote, "***I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.***" (Romans 1:16) More powerful than any physical enemy is the power which chose you from the foundation of the world. The power that transformed you. The power that called you. The power that redeemed you. The power that will lead you into life everlasting. So may that power, that *unchanging* love of God continue to reign and rule in our hearts and minds here on earth just as it will forever in heaven. May God grant it, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.