

# Two Men Went to Church

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Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16, Philippians 2:1-13, [Matthew 21:23-32](#)

In the gospels we are told that, when Jesus went down to Jerusalem for what turned out to be the last week of his life, he spent a great deal of time in and around the temple being challenged by various religious authorities. They would come up to him with these impossible questions, questions like, “Should we pay taxes to the emperor?” or “Who would be the husband of a woman married seven times in the afterlife?”

## Looking to Trap Him

They didn’t really ask because they were sincerely looking for an answer to these conundrums. They were asking because they were sure that he would not be able to answer or that he would make a mistake in his answer. They wanted to catch him, to put him in his place and show themselves as smarter than him. But, in a stunning display of wisdom and cleverness, he came up with the perfect answer every time, often putting them in their place instead.

But that long series of challenges finally comes to an end in the reading that we had this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. And what an end it is! In this passage, Jesus finally turns the tables on all his challengers. They tried to burn him, and he gives them third degree burns instead.

## Jesus Turns the Tables

He does that first of all with a question about John the Baptist that he knows they cannot answer. He asks them whether John’s teaching and baptism came from God or human sources. It’s the same kind of strategy that they had tried against him with the tax question. No matter what they reply, they know that they will get in trouble. But where Jesus was smart enough to get out of their trap, they aren’t. They just have to admit that they don’t know and do so in front of everybody! Man, do you need some ice for that burn?

But it is what Jesus says after that that particularly interests me here today. He ends this whole series of stories with a real challenge that I do not think is only directed at his immediate antagonists. I suspect that this one is directed at us as well.

## A Tale of Two Sons

He does it – and isn’t this typical of Jesus – by telling a story. It is a story about two sons that ends with a question: **“Which of the two did the will of his father?”** And the thing is that that is not even a difficult question to answer. The answer is obvious, and they get it right away. The first son actually did something that his father asked and the second one didn’t. It is clear that the first one did the will of his father, and they immediately say so.

But of course – and this is also typical of Jesus – there is a complication in the story. Because it turns out that the second son may not have done what his father asked, but he did *say* the right thing. He didn’t have the reality of correct action, but he did have the appearance



of it. He may not have had the substance of obedience, but he had the form.

## Appearance and Reality

And the problem is that, in our world, we tend to put more importance on saying the right thing than doing the right thing. We are more interested in appearance than reality and we applaud form over substance. For proof of that, just look at the way that we celebrate celebrities and how we respond to the promises and platitudes of politicians. They are all about form and appearance and saying the right thing, rarely about substance, reality and doing the right thing.

And so, Jesus is calling out the shallowness of his challengers with this little story. He is letting them know, in particular, that they are rejecting some people, treating them as less valuable and important than them and they are doing it for unimportant and surface reasons.

## Let the Story Challenge You

You should not listen to this story without allowing it to challenge you to rethink how you – probably without even thinking about it – judge and reject other people for reasons that are unimportant and based merely on appearances and surfaces.

But perhaps the story doesn't have quite the impact on us as it did on the people in Jesus' time. After all, not too many parents today expect their children to do work in the fields for them. So perhaps we need to update the story to something that we can relate to a little easier.

## Perfect Church Attender?

So, what if Jesus told the story like this: two men went to church on a Sunday. The first man, a very distinguished gentleman, was perfectly behaved. He stood when everyone else stood, and then sat when he was supposed to. When there were hymns to be sung, he stood and held the hymn book at a perfect 30° angle and mouthed the words in perfect sync with everyone else – not actually singing, of course, so it's not to draw any attention to himself.

When the service was over, he politely greeted a few people and shook a few hands and left. After leaving, he never said anything about where he had spent his Sunday morning hour to a single soul and did his best to make sure that nothing that had been said or sung during the worship service had an impact on the way that he lived his life.

## The Social Media Guy

When the second man entered into the church, the first thing he did was take out his cell phone and post where he was on social media. Right before the start, he was still taking a few selfies of himself in front of the organ pipes and one of the stained-glass windows that he tagged as being particularly "rad." He then rushed to his seat as the service began to film the people singing the opening hymn.

The people sitting near him particularly noticed how he was constantly looking down at his phone while the preacher was preaching. They tisked to one another behind his back, but I don't think that they noticed that he was posting some of his favourite quotes from the sermon on his twitter feed as he listened.

When the service was over, he tried to speak to practically everyone who was there, asking them (most intrusively some of them thought) how they were going to put the Gospel lesson of the day in practice over the next week. When he finally left (much to the relief of the woman who had the job of locking up for the day), he said that it was because he had to go and do what the Gospel had said.

## Who did the Will of Jesus?

So, let me ask you, which of those two did the will of his lord and saviour Jesus? The answer should be clear, right? Obviously, it has got to be the one who shared his experience of the word of God and who tried his best to live by it. That's exactly what Jesus was looking for in a disciple.

But who, do you suppose, would we be more inclined to see as a good Christian? Most churches I have known would be much more inclined to recognize the first man as a good Christian than the second.

Most churches seem to frown on the use of cell phones during the service, some outright banning them, in an effort to protect the reverence of the occasion. And most churches that I have known have struggled with finding a place for anyone who challenges the way that things have always been done or disturbs the status quo.

## Do We Focus on the Wrong Things?

But when we think that way, what are we really focussing on, on surface matters or on what is actually going on in someone's heart? And it goes deeper than that. Our obsessions with maintaining proper reverence in worship may be killing us.

We're living in an age, after all, when information clearly does not spread like it once did. All of the ways in which people once became involved in churches – by seeking them out when they moved into town or when they came to some transition in their life – don't really work in the same way anymore.

Most people (and especially younger people) make their first contact with churches in the same way that they connect with most things: online, and especially through social media. And, while churches are creating more and more content in digital format these days, members seem hesitant to share that content with people outside the church. Yes, we could probably learn a great deal from the second worshipper in my story. The question is, will we?

## A Bigger Challenge

So, Jesus challenges his opponents to rethink how they focus on the things that don't matter to God – the surface things – when they judge other people. But if you think he would let them off easy with just *that* challenge, you've got another think coming. What he says next really must have hit them hard.

**“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 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 Worst of the Worst!

And I would just love to have been there to see how they squirmed when he said that to them. He just named the two groups of people who, as far as they were concerned, were the worst members of their society. For them, a tax collector was the worst thing that a man could be because he collaborated with the hated Roman occupiers. And a prostitute was the worst thing that a woman could be because of what she trafficked in. And yet Jesus has just said to them that these very people will proceed them when it comes to entry into God's kingdom when it arrives.

There is no question that Jesus made this statement in a way that was calculated to upset his listeners. He wanted to disturb them with the very idea that the people that they thought were

unacceptable were completely acceptable to God, certainly more acceptable than them. And that raises the question of how we ought to read this saying of Jesus today.

## Tax Collectors and Prostitutes for Us

We, obviously, would not have the same reaction to the phrase “tax collector” that they would have had. We might all have various reactions to people who are employed at Revenue Canada. I realize that many of us do not really enjoy paying our taxes. But we do not think that there is anything essentially morally objectionable about people just because they work for that agency.

Some of us might have a negative reaction to the idea of sex workers, but even there, we today tend to be more sympathetic to people who are employed in that industry than people were in Jesus’ day. We are a bit more inclined to get upset at those who purchase their services or profit from them than the workers themselves.

## Would Jesus let Us off the Hook?

So, the literal words to his opponents here, certainly do not have the same emotional impact on us today that they did on the original crowd. But I’m just warning you that I don’t think that we should let ourselves off the hook because of that. If Jesus were among us today, he certainly wouldn’t do that for us.

No, the Jesus that we encounter in the scriptures would probably put his finger on the very group of people that each and every one of us would be most scandalized to think that they might be ahead of us in the kingdom of God.

## What Might Jesus Say?

There are certainly some Christians today in our world that I am pretty sure Jesus would look straight in the eye and say to them, “You know, the people in the LGBTQ community are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you because they choose to be true to who I created them to be, even at great cost.” And then he would step back and watch as they sputtered and complained and protested about their own righteousness. That was exactly the spot that Jesus loved to put people in.

But, at the same time, I also know that Jesus wouldn’t be about to let those Christians, and there are many of them, who don’t have issues accepting people in the LGBTQ community off the hook. I wouldn’t be surprised if Jesus went up to them and said, “You know, all of those people who get caught up in conspiracy theories around vaccines and election fraud and the World Economic Forum? They will be ahead of you in the kingdom of God, not necessarily because they believe all the right things, mind you, but because they have at least realized just how messed up the world’s system is.”

## Equal Opportunity Offender

Jesus, you see, was an equal opportunity offender. He was always ready to say the thing that would shake you into understanding that he and God were much more open to accept someone different than you are. And, though I suppose we’ll never quite catch up to Jesus and God by being that accepting, never forget that he told these parables and said these things to push us in that direction.

Who are the last people you could imagine getting into the kingdom of God before you? Well, today, with this scripture, Jesus is giving you a little bit of an elbow and whispering into your ear. “Hey, did you know that that person is actually ahead of you in line for God’s kingdom?” And he may leave you to figure out why that is, but the main reason is that God’s grace is always much bigger than our wildest imaginations.