

Matthew 21:23–32 Study Handout

Saying Yes With Your Life

Theme: God cares less about religious talk than obedient hearts turned toward Him.

Introduction

Jesus is teaching in the temple after His triumphal entry and cleansing of the temple courts. The chief priests and elders challenge His authority, but Jesus turns their question back on them by asking about John the Baptist. He then tells the parable of two sons, exposing the difference between saying the right thing and actually responding to God.

The passage offers both warning and hope. Religious words are not enough without obedience, but a person who has said no to God can still turn around. Grace makes repentance possible.

Background

- Jesus is in Jerusalem during the final week before the crucifixion.
- The temple was the center of Israel's religious life and authority.
- Jesus has already challenged the temple establishment by overturning the tables of the money changers.
- John the Baptist had called Israel to repentance and prepared the way for Jesus.
- Many social outsiders responded to John, while many religious leaders rejected his message.
- The vineyard recalls Old Testament imagery for Israel, especially Isaiah 5.

Matthew 21:23–27

Who Gave You This Authority?

The chief priests and elders ask Jesus who authorized Him to teach and act as He does. Jesus answers by asking whether John's baptism came from God or from human beings.

The leaders realize they are trapped. If they say John came from God, Jesus can ask why they refused to believe him. If they deny John's authority, they fear the crowd, who regarded John as a prophet.

Their discussion reveals the real problem. They are not asking, "What is true?" They are asking, "Which answer will cause us the least trouble?"

Key Truth: Religious people can become so concerned with protecting their position that they stop honestly asking where God is at work.

Matthew 21:28–30

Two Sons, Two Answers

A father asks both sons to work in his vineyard.

The first son says no but later changes his mind and goes. The second son respectfully says yes but never goes.

The contrast is simple:

- One son has bad words followed by obedience.
- The other has good words followed by disobedience.
- The first son's initial refusal does not become his final answer.
- Repentance becomes visible through a changed direction.

The first son gives us hope. Jesus does not define him forever by his worst response.

Key Truth: Repentance means more than regret. It means turning and moving in a new direction.

Matthew 21:31–32

Who Actually Did the Father's Will?

The leaders correctly identify the first son as the obedient one. Jesus then applies the story directly to them.

Tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom ahead of the religious leaders because they had responded to John's message. Jesus is not praising sin. He is pointing to repentance.

Those considered farthest from God heard the call and turned toward Him. Those who appeared closest to God saw changed lives and still refused to reconsider.

The leaders had heard John, seen his ministry, and witnessed people change, yet they remained unmoved.

Key Truth: The issue is not how religious we appear but whether we are willing to respond when God calls us to change.

Wesleyan Emphasis

Wesleyan theology emphasizes that God's grace always moves first. Prevenient grace awakens us and enables us to respond to God.

The first son illustrates this movement beautifully. His no becomes a yes. Repentance does not earn grace. It is a response to grace already reaching toward us.

Randy Maddox describes Wesley's theology as **responsible grace**. God acts first, but people are genuinely called to respond.

This passage also points toward sanctification. Grace does more than forgive us. Grace begins changing the way we live.

- **Prevenient grace** calls us.
- **Justifying grace** forgives us.
- **Sanctifying grace** forms us into people whose lives increasingly reflect Christ.

Religious practices such as prayer, worship, Scripture, Communion, fasting, and service are means of grace, but they cannot replace obedience.

Living the Passage

It is easy to say yes to God in theory.

We can say yes to forgiveness while holding onto resentment. We can say yes to generosity while protecting everything we have. We can say yes to loving our neighbor until the neighbor becomes difficult. We can say yes to following Jesus as long as He leads us somewhere comfortable.

Jesus asks whether our lives say the same thing our mouths say.

The first son reminds us that yesterday's no does not have to be today's answer. Grace leaves room to turn.

The second son reminds us that good religious words are not enough.

The question is not whether we have always gotten it right. The question is: **Which direction are we moving now?**

A life turned toward God will not be perfect, but it will increasingly show evidence of grace through mercy, forgiveness, generosity, humility, compassion, and love.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the leaders' response to Jesus' question about John reveal about them?
2. Why is the first son a picture of repentance?
3. What is the difference between regret and repentance?
4. How can Christians become like the second son without realizing it?
5. Why were Jesus' words about tax collectors and prostitutes so shocking?
6. What does this passage teach us about the reach of God's grace?
7. Where might there be a gap between what you say you believe and how you are living?
8. Is there an area where God may be giving you another opportunity to turn and say yes?