

“The Sin of Indecision”
(Matthew 21:23-27)

Have you ever had trouble making up your mind? Maybe you children were asked by your parents what you wanted for Christmas, but there were so many things you wanted, you had trouble making up your mind. Or maybe you adults have gone to a restaurant, but had difficulty deciding what to order. Or maybe there have been times you wanted to do something recreational with your family, but you couldn't find anything that everyone could agree on. Maybe you had trouble making up your mind in more important areas, as well, such as what college to enroll in, what your major would be, what kind of work you wanted to do, or where in the United States or in the world you would live. We all have many choices to make in life, and sometimes we're just not sure what the best choices are. Thankfully, most of our decisions won't have devastating consequences if we happen to choose the wrong thing. But we do need to recognize that there are choices which will, especially those in the area of the Christian faith. Perhaps our biggest problem when it comes to making choices here is not so much what we should do -- the Lord generally makes that plain enough --, but whether or not we can bring ourselves to do it. We have a struggle with our hearts. What Jesus said of Peter is often true of us, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

This morning, we're going to look at some men who also had a hard time making up their minds. Jesus asked them a question they had difficulty answering. But it wasn't because they didn't know how to answer. It was because of their sin that they didn't want to answer. Through their example, I would like for us to consider how our sin often makes our decisions more difficult for us.

We reach an interesting turning point here in the ministry of our Lord Jesus. Until now, He has exposed the sin and wickedness of the Jewish leaders, but never to this extent. What He says this morning, along with what He will say in the next eight sections, is a powerful indictment of their hypocrisy. It's almost as if Jesus is purposely opening Himself to their full hatred and wrath. This inevitably happens when you tell wicked men the truth about themselves. They will hate you for it. In Jesus' case, this will lead to His crucifixion. This is the means by which the Father will bring it about. If we think this is strange, we need to remember that the Lord always uses means to bring about His ends. Things don't happen by themselves. We know that God ordained the crucifixion of His Son. But He ordained that it would be by the hands of wicked men. But men don't kill other men for no reason. There must always be a cause. In this case, the cause is that they didn't want to hear the truth about themselves. The crucifixion was the means by which they hoped permanently to close His mouth, so they wouldn't have to listen to Him anymore. Remembering that we also have sin in our hearts, and that this sin is of the same nature as theirs, we need to take warning here that we don't allow ourselves also to become bitter against the truth, close our ears to it, and desire to stop it.

Matthew now tells us that after Jesus cursed the fig tree, as He was on His way back into Jerusalem, He then returned to the Temple and began to teach the people. When the chief priests and elders saw Him, they began to question Him, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (v. 23). What “things” were they talking about? His throwing the money changers and those who were buying and selling animals out of the Temple for one thing; and His healing the people and teaching them in the Temple for another. After all,

God's worship wasn't a free for all. There were certain established guidelines that needed to be followed. Sadly, they were no longer following God's guidelines, but their own. This is what had caused the problem in the first place. But since they were in charge, they wanted to know what made Jesus think He had the right to step in and change things. They certainly hadn't given him their permission.

Now did Jesus really need to answer their question? After all, He had already shown them His divine credentials, by healing many who were sick in the Temple. This was the most powerful testimony He could have given about Himself. It showed without a doubt that God had sent Him, and if God had sent Him, surely that gave Him the right to do these things. No. He didn't need to answer any more of their foolish questions. But, seeing this as an opportunity to further point out to them their hypocrisy, He decided to ask them a question. He said, "I will ask you one thing too, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" (v. 25). This question was simple enough, and it was reasonable. It was only about three years ago that John was doing things which were very similar what Jesus was doing. He didn't perform any miracles, but he did fulfill prophecy, preach to the people, and baptize those who repented. What gave him the right to do these things? Where did he get this authority? It could have come from only one of two places: it was either from heaven -- that is from God Himself --, or it was from men. There aren't any other options. Jesus asked them which of the two it was.

Now here's where Jesus shows us how shrewd He could be. He knew what these men thought about John. He knew that they hadn't received him or his message, for if they had, they would have already received Him, especially since the burden of John's message was the fact that he was sent to prepare the way for Him. But Jesus also knew that they wouldn't be willing to admit this, because they were hypocrites. They were just playing the part the spiritual leader. They were just acting for the benefit of the people and for their own benefit. In their heart of hearts, they weren't spiritual, they really didn't love God. We know this is true because they didn't love Jesus, who is the perfect image of the invisible God. You can't love God and hate His Son. It's impossible. They are exactly alike. They share the same nature. We also know they didn't love God by the way they reasoned through Jesus' question. They said, "If we say [that John's baptism was] 'From heaven,' [Jesus] will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' But if we say [that it was] 'From men,' we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet" (vv. 25-26). They were caught between the proverbial rock and the hard place. The truth would expose them. No matter which way they chose, they would end up where they didn't want to be. If they confessed that John's baptism was from heaven, they would have to eat their words concerning Christ and submit to Him. But if they said it was from men, the multitudes might stone them, because they at least believed John was sent from God. What were they to do? If they choose one way or the other, their hypocrisy would be exposed. The only option they had left by which they could "save face" was to plead ignorance. They said, "We do not know" (v. 27). But this is just what Jesus expected them to say. He knew they wouldn't admit the truth. But in saying this, they still exposed their hypocrisy. The crowds might not have seen it -- which is what they were most concerned about --, but Jesus did. And so now, after showing them so many mighty miracles and after having exposed their hearts one more time, proving that He was the Lord who knew the hearts of all men, should Jesus answer their hypocritical question? No. He said, since you won't tell Me, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (v. 27). After all, He knew they were only looking for another reason to condemn Him.

This is what sin does to a person. It makes him deny the truth. It makes him a fearer of men rather than a fearer of God. It makes him try to save face, to try and look better than he really is. The chief priests and elders were not willing to admit their hypocrisy. When faced with a simple question about what they believed, their only concern was how the answer would affect them. They answered according to what they would look like, according to what was comfortable, according to what they were willing to do, but not according to the truth.

But how many times have we been faced with similar situations and responded the same way, because of our own sin. Jesus confronts us with His authority in His Word, but yet we try to find some way to reason ourselves out of what He wants us to do, not because we don't know it's His will, but because we don't want to do it. Now I'm not saying that there is never any doubt about what God wants. Sometimes there is. But very often knowing the truth isn't the problem. Doing it is. Even though we may have received Jesus as our Savior and Lord, doesn't mean that we don't have to struggle with sin. Every day we have to fight against it, if we're going to do what Jesus calls us to do. Every spiritual duty will be a struggle, and the greater the duty, the greater will be the struggle. But so often we fail, because we give in to our corruption too easily, and don't fight against it. Let me give you just one example. Jesus tells us that He wants us to pray, not just now and again, but at all times, to continue in it in season and out of season. The Spirit, who lives in us, moves our hearts in that direction, because He knows we need it for the good of our souls. But our flesh doesn't like it. It doesn't want us to pray. It does everything it can to keep us away from prayer and everything else that will kill it and make us more like Christ. And so we find ourselves faced with a dilemma, with indecision, much like these Jews. If we confess that Jesus is right and that we need to give ourselves more to prayer, then we will have to change. We will need to confess our sin of not praying as we should, turn from our old patterns and habits of prayer, and begin to strive to put on the right kind of prayer life. This is what the Spirit will be influencing us to do. But our flesh will fight against it to keep us from going in that direction. Among other things, it will try and convince us that Jesus didn't really mean that we need to pray like this. After all, He is in heaven praying for us now, and if He is praying for us, why do we need to pray? It will tell us that we pray enough, and that surely the Lord doesn't expect any more than what we give Him before our meals, when we thank Him for our daily food, ask for His blessing upon it, and pray for the few other things we're concerned about. Christ has done everything we need to make it to heaven anyway, so we might as well just sit back, relax and enjoy the ride. We have this same struggle in other areas as well: in our reading and Bible study, our witnessing, our willingness to give, our serving, our comforting, admonishing and rebuking our brethren. We struggle in our efforts to be faithful to God's commandments. Our flesh is always there fighting against us, just as the scribes, Pharisees, chief priests and elders fought against Christ. This is what makes living the Christian life so difficult. But realize that understanding that this warfare is real is half the battle. Our sin may have already deceived us into thinking we should only do something the Lord tells us to do if we feel like it. The problem is that we rarely find our whole heart wanting to do what we know we should. It will always be a battle. If this has been your experience, then be encouraged, this is how our Lord said it would be. But also be encouraged by the fact that the Lord has given you what you need to win the battle. Look to Him everyday in prayer. Ask Him not only for the wisdom to know His will, but the strength to do it. If you earnestly seek Him daily, He will give it to you. And so seek Him earnestly. It is the only way that you will be able to overcome the world and stand before Him on the last day.

But on the other hand, if you find that your flesh is always winning over the desire of the

Spirit, if you never really get down to loving and serving Christ at all, let this example of the priests and elders be a warning to you. Our Lord tells us that the Christian will overcome his flesh and live more and more in the Spirit, while the unbeliever will not, because he doesn't have anything more than the conviction of the Spirit in his conscience. If this is the case with you, you need to be born again by God's Spirit, for only with His divine help will you ever be able to overcome it. Jesus is the only one who can give this gift to you, so you must come to Him, you must ask Him to save you, to turn your heart around and give you a new heart, a clean heart. Whatever your need is here this morning, whether it's more strength to live the life God calls you to, or the power to begin to live it, Christ is still the answer. Call on Him now while He is near. He will never turn anyone away who sincerely comes to Him for help. Amen.