

**Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL**  
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**Worship Series: Tell Us a Story**  
**Service Theme: A Story of Spiritual Insincerity**

**Sermon Theme: Let's Get Real!**

- 1.) Real Repentance**
- 2.) Real Obedience**
- 3.) Real Savior**

**July 30, 2023    Matthew 21:23-32**

In a 2022 poll of over 3,000 American adults, around 55% of those who were non-religious described American Christians as “hypocritical,” “self-righteous,” or “judgmental.” However, the study also found that that’s not what Christians think about themselves. Christians described themselves with adjectives like, “compassionate,” “loving,” and “respectful.” Obviously, there’s a fundamental disconnect between what Christians think about Christians, and what non-Christians think about Christians!

As Christians, our first response might be to get defensive and call those people’s opinions ridiculous and biased. And certainly, some people blindly buy into the negative stereotypes that our culture has formed about Christians, or make sweeping generalizations about all Christians based on their experience with a few.

But might it be good for us to do some soul-searching on why over half of those non-Christians assume you’re fake? Do we Christians sometimes give non-Christians legitimate reasons to assume that we’re insincere because of our words, actions, or lack thereof? This morning, **Let's Get Real!** to ensure we’re being real about our Christian faith!

Jesus obviously wants us to wrestle with the sincerity of our spiritual lives, as the story he tells this morning forces his hearers to do. It was the Tuesday of Holy Week. Two days earlier, Jesus had triumphantly rode a donkey into Jerusalem, flanked by cheering Palm Sunday crowds. The day before, he’d driven the money changers and merchants from the Temple Courts in his Father’s house. And on

Tuesday, Jesus was in those same Temple courts teaching the people when, ***“the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”***

They knew that Jesus often proclaimed he’d been sent by his heavenly Father. So, they were trying to trap Jesus with this question. If he claimed his authority came from God, they could accuse him of blasphemy. But if he claimed his authority had come from men, they could discredit him to his followers who viewed him as God’s promised Messiah.

But because Jesus knew their intentions, he answered their question with a question. Not like a politician trying to avoid a question they can’t or don’t want to answer. Jesus’ question sought to answer his enemies’ question. Jesus responds, ***“I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”***

What did John’s baptism have to do with Jesus’ authority? Everything, actually! While John preached a message of repentance and baptized people in the Jordan River, the Jewish religious leaders also questioned his authority, like they did to Jesus. John answered their question by pointing them to the one who would come after him; the Messiah God had sent John to prepare the way for.

By asking them about John’s baptism, Jesus was answering their question. His authority came from God, because he was the Messiah God had promised to send! But they still refused to confess that they’d been wrong about John, and thus about Jesus, so the religious leaders dodged Jesus’ question, saying, ***“We don’t know.”***

So Jesus tells a story to confront their hypocritical hearts. ***“There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” “I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then, the father went to the other son***

*and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir,” but he did not go.”*

The first son doesn't pull any punches. He doesn't make excuses or ask to do it later. He straight up says, “No. I don't wanna.” In a heavily patriarchal Israelite culture, if your father asked you to do something, you did it. Period. So this son's blatant denial of his father's request was like telling your Dad no while flipping him the bird! Yikes! In contrast, the other son comes off as a model citizen! In Greek, he responds, **“I, sir!”** with a breathless enthusiasm to voice his obedience to his father's will, then caps it all off by calling Dad by a respectful title.

If their initial responses were all we knew of the story, it would be no contest which son was faithful, and which one was fake! In Jewish culture, it appeared to be as equally cut and dry. The Pharisees, Chief Priests, and Elders of Israel appeared so pious and faithful, impeccable with their attention to detail toward God's law, voicing such breathless eagerness to obey God's will.

Then there were the prostitutes, tax collectors, Gentiles, and other sinful *“persona non gratas”* of Jewish society whose lifestyles might as well have been a middle finger to a holy God. Which would people say were the real godly people? No contest, right?

But with this story, Jesus teaches that being a real child of God means more than just saying the right things and putting on airs. The son who said all the right things didn't actually obey his father's will, because he never went and worked in his father's vineyard. While the son who at first denied his father's request eventually had a change of heart, went out and obeyed his father's will.

How those religious leaders' jaws and hands must have clenched tight when Jesus responded told them they were the second son, and rebuked them, ***“The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax***

***collectors and prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”***

Despite saying all the right things and giving the allusion of righteousness and obedience to God, the Jewish religious leaders had questioned John's authority, and Jesus' authority, and now had their hearts set on killing the one John had pointed them to! Their outward faithfulness was a cover for their fake, insincere, unfaithful hearts toward God and his Son. The prostitutes and tax collectors, however, went out to John in repentance for their sins to be baptized by him. They had also flocked to Jesus, repenting of their sins, and trusting in him. Which ones were real, sincere followers of God, and which ones were fake, spiritually insincere hypocrites?

With this parable, Jesus called the religious leaders to the carpet. And Jesus' parable can also force us to wrestle with whether our spiritual lives are real, or just for show. Are we real Christians? Or the fake, hypocritical Christians so many non-Christians think we are? If we're going to “get real” in our spiritual lives, Jesus' parable shows us three things that are necessary: **Real Repentance, Real Obedience, and a Real Savior.**

Let's be real, no one would say the first son's initial response to his dad's request was OK. Neither were the sinful actions and lifestyles of the prostitutes and tax collectors. Which is why real repentance was necessary. Repentance means to feel remorse over sin, and to change our hearts and minds about it. Real repentance means being real about just how sinful and undeserving of God's love we really are! Jesus said the first son ***“changed his mind and went.”*** He took to heart how wrongly he'd treated his father. The prostitutes and tax collectors heard John's call for repentance, changed their hearts and minds about their sinful lifestyles, and admitted their need for forgiveness.

But the religious leaders saw no need for repentance. Their going through the motions and saying all the right things had so filled them with self-righteousness that they were oblivious to their desperate need for repentance and forgiveness. So they wanted to take down the Savior of the world, rather than bow down before him. That's why the

tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the Kingdom of God before the religious leaders—because they got real about their need for real repentance, while the religious leaders remained insincere.

Might that be one reason Christians sometimes earn a negative reputation? It's easy to dress ourselves up with righteous-looking actions--church attendance, offerings, serving in our church or community, raising our kids in the faith, and other forms of outward piety-- and convince ourselves that we aren't filthy with sin. We too can get so filled with self-righteousness that we feel no need for repentance. And we think of ourselves too highly and too holy, three things will happen: We feel less of a need for Christ. We'll inevitably look down on everyone else. And we'll get caught up in an unending hamster wheel of works to try and convince ourselves and others that we're good enough. Just like the Jewish religious leaders did. If we want to get real, it needs to include real repentance!

Along with real repentance, being spiritually real also requires real obedience! Although the second son said all the right things, he wasn't obedient to his father's will because he didn't do what his father asked. The first son showcased his real repentance by following it up with real obedience—by doing what his father asked!

Likewise, being a real Christian is more than just talking the talk. It also means striving to obey God's will by doing what he says to do, and not doing what he says not to. But how easy it can be for us Christians to recite all the passages, speak all the “Christianese” words and phrases, but then live in complete disobedience to God's will. We might talk the talk and walk the walk out in public, but would people who know us behind closed doors wonder who that pious-looking person in church is, because that's not how we normally act.

Again, is it any surprise that non-Christians would describe Christians as hypocrites if they see us with a holier-than-thou attitude, but living lives no different than theirs? Isn't there a little lukewarm Pharisee in each of our hearts that might confess Christ with our mouth, but denies him with our actions? A Chief Priest in our sinful nature eagerly crying out, “I, sir!” to impress the masses, but not seeing the problem if we

never go and work in the vineyard? If we want to get real, in needs to include real obedience! As James, the half-brother of Jesus writes, ***“Do not merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”***

Let's be real. Don't we constantly flip-flop back and forth in our lives between the two brothers in Jesus' story? Sometimes we're fake Christians as we outright disobey God's will; other times we're fake Christians by saying all the right things, and giving off the right appearance, but not actually obeying God's will. Which is why, if we want to get real, we needed a real Savior!

You see, there's an unmentioned third son in this parable as well. The Son who's telling the story. The Son who both always said the right thing, and always did the right thing too! Jesus is the only Son who perfectly responded to his Father's will, “I, Sir!” and then perfectly obeyed his Father's will with his actions. The Son who prayed to his Father in the Garden, ***“Not my will, but yours be done,”*** and then drank the cup of suffering the Father had poured for him, being ***“obedient to death, even death on a cross.”***

Because that perfect Son came to be the Savior of the world, we have real forgiveness for all our real sins and fake hypocrisy! And it's that real Savior Jesus, and the forgiveness and salvation he has won for us that equips and motivates us to get real—to understand our need for, and to change our hearts and minds in real repentance; and to serve God with real obedience!

And if we get real about our faith, do you know what it will do? It will change a lot of those non-religious people's perspective on us Christians. You see, if we see our need for real repentance, then our churches won't have to be museums of righteousness where everyone puts on an act to convince everyone else just how holy they are! Instead, we can get real with each other; confessing our failures, vocalizing our weaknesses, and being real about the struggles we're all going through. And if we do that, rather than being a place where everyone looks down on everyone else for their sins, we can be a place where we lift each other up, encourage one another, show loving

accountability, and point ourselves and everyone to our very real Savior Jesus.

Wouldn't that make our churches places where people would want to be? Places where they'll feel not judged, but loved unconditionally-- by Christ and by his children. Places that would make people describe Christians as "real," "compassionate," and "loving." I hope that's what we want our church to be—what we want to be! If so, then let's get real. Real repentance, real obedience, and most importantly—real Savior!