

Sermon: Parable of the Two Sons

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, 2026/09/27)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What is power? Power is the capacity and ability to influence, perhaps even to direct the behaviour of others, or to change the course of events. It is terrible to be in a state of powerlessness for those without power. If one is without it, one wants to acquire it. Acquiring power is to be an universal pursuit with wide appeal, be it in study, in work, raising a family, participating in shaping public policies.

Some do not like the sound of ‘power’; they swap it out with ‘agency’—a more nuanced term. Agency is the will and the ability to choose, but power is what makes those choices effective. Without power, all the agency one think one has is pretty much moot.

Power gets things done. Power compels and propels. There is an attractive quality to power, perhaps even seductive. I think it was Lord Acton, the 19th century English historian and politician who coined the phrase: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” And we have seen this playing itself out in the course of humanity. When a person or a regime has amassed so much power, they tend not to wield it rightly or justly. They tend to wield the power they already have to acquire more of it, to the ultimate detriment of themselves and all others around them.

It is with that in mind, we turn to our Scripture passage today of Matthew 21:23, “When he (meaning Jesus) entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?””

Ever since Jesus started his earthly ministry, he had spoken and taught with power and authority. He had demonstrated the miraculous power to heal, the fearsome power to cast out demons and the awesome power to calm storms. But the ‘these things’ alluded to by the chief priest and the elders refer to Jesus overturning money-changers’ tables, and chastising the religious authorities for turning the house of prayer of the Lord into dens of thieves for enriching themselves. The action and the

words of Jesus were essentially in direct conflict to the powers chief priests and elders wielded. The power of religion to defend itself is perhaps not surprising. I mean, someone has to play the role of a gatekeeper—keeping out undesirable rascal or unproven prophet with questionable credential and debatable resume. I mean, who let this Jesus of Nazareth have power over us?

For the past few months, I have participated in the search committee for the principal of the Presbyterian College. The current and outgoing Principal Rev. Dr. Roland De Vries, after serving the College quite capably for over a decade, first as the Director of Pastoral Studies then as Principal, is leaving the College by the end of the year, returning to congregational ministry I believe. His surprise decision to leave the College prompted the search process. To date, 11 candidates have applied, and 6 have been short-listed for the first round of interviews by Zoom.

The original plan is to further short-list the candidates to 2 or 3 for the 2nd round of in-person interview, but after interviewing the 6, only one has received unanimous support to proceed the the next round. Try as I might to convince the other committee members to include more candidates for the crucial in-person interview, I was not successful. No other candidates thus far has received more than 1/2 of the votes. It would appear the other search committee members seem to apply a much stricter standards in evaluating candidates than I do, in general. They appear to reject a candidate based on one or two things they do not like about that particular candidate, much more so than I would.

Perhaps it's just me, I am more likely to give people a chance than others would. I get it, it's not a perfect process, and I would even call it flawed—imperfect human being trying to gate-keep in choosing who is to be their leader, while discerning the will of God. I have to trust this process, trust that the Spirit of God is at work in all our hearts, and in all my previous experience in search, either as convener, advisor, or a committee member, God has yet to fail us, thus far. So praise be to God, hallelujah!

Still, let me get back to the question that I really wanted to ask, and the search process for the Principal of the Presbytery College is only the set-up: What if Jesus applies to this position? What if Jesus of Nazareth submits his resume to such a leadership position in a theological college, would he be invited to the first-round of interview? Would he make it to the 2nd round?

Let me see, he is prone to angry outburst...so low EQ. He often has illusion of grandeur—hm...just a daydreamer who is not grounded in reality. How about his propensity to speak in parable, to never answer directly, and often resort to sarcasm...yah, he just doesn't connect with the interviewers; probably should take more lessons on how to be a much more polished interviewee. How about his academic background? I see not much formal education, never learned under a reputable Rabi. How about character references? Hm...lukewarm support from his own family; rejected by his own people...this is really not looking good. He is prone to confrontation; he is certainly not obedient to authority, religious or otherwise. He keeps companies of the undesirable—sinners, prostitutes, tax-collectors. I can keep going, but you get the gist.

Jesus and religious gatekeepers really do not mix; they do not get along; and if these religious authorities ever get to pick their own leader, Jesus the Son of God would certainly not be invited even for a brief Zoom interview. They would not even give him a time of day.

It is in such context, Jesus told the Parable of the Two Sons, not the prodigal one which is more well-known, but this much less known version: *"A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not,' but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go."* (v.28-30) Asked Jesus, now which of the two did what his father wanted? To which they replied, "The first."

As you may recall last week, Jesus also spoke in parable about another vineyard, and I had explained the vineyard metaphor is really pointing to the Kingdom of God. This is not just a run-of-the-mill story about labourers, these parables of vineyard is always about faith. When it come to faith, one can appreciate the importance of living it more so than talking about it. *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* (James 1:22) Or *"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."* (1 John 3:18)

So the answer by the chief priest and elders of the people were correct—the first son who rejected his father's request, then changed his mind and went, this son did the father's will. The second son, who appears to comply with is mouth, but then chooses not to do with his hands or feet or heart, that son did not do the will of the father. In such way, the second son represents all who talk a good talk of faith but would not live it.

However, before any of these chief priests and elders had the chance or the time to digest what Jesus was saying in this parable, before they could even catch a breath, Jesus already laid into them, maximally, *“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”* (Matthew 21:31)

Evidently, the second son was them, these religious authorities; they are the ones whose hypocrisy knows no end. They are the ones who *“tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”* (Matthew 23:4) Evidently also, the first son was referring to sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes and all who humble themselves before God and repent of their sins. **For whomsoever would not, could not repent is unworthy to enter into the Kingdom, unworthy of a place in paradise ordained by God.**

On this contrast between the first son and the second son, what is not mentioned and often lost in such opposing way of framing things, is the dialectical synthesis of what I would call ‘the third son’. No, it’s not in the Scripture, you don’t need to look. What I am referring to is the example that Jesus set for us, the one and only begotten Son of God, the son of man, the son whose way we follow.

He is the son who obeys and does the work of the father. He is the son who exercises his power, and what an incredible power that be, through love and self-sacrifice. He is the son who follows that path of self-sacrifice, or ‘kenosis’ in Greek describing a dynamic and ongoing self-emptying, until ultimately he gave his life on the cross. When this son is raised and exalted by the father, and given the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus, every knee shall bend, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In turn, he commissions us, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:18-20) Yes, to this Son, I bend my knee, confess with my mouth and heart, trust implicitly and follow unconditionally. And the invitation is open for you, to do the same.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**