Which Son Are You? Q&A Guide

Sep 29, 2026

About this guide: anyone is welcome to use this guide, including members of the Intercessor Church Community Groups. Read it before class or on your own so you come prepared and well versed in the passage. It follows the Discover section of the group outline, section by section. For each question it gathers what trusted commentaries and the ICCEC Catechism say, then adds a Summary that pulls it together and a Deep Dive with background and passages to read ahead of time.

How to read this guide: each question is labeled to match the outline, so A1 is the first question in section A, A2 is the second, and so on. The questions are written for this guide. Each one covers the same ground as the matching outline question and takes it a step further. The linked passage after each question is the one the outline points to, so you can click it and read it in class. Anything after the word "also" is a wider range or an extra passage this guide adds. Every line under Commentary and ICCEC Catechism is quoted word for word from the source named in parentheses after it. The **Summary** and **Deep Dive** under each question are written for this guide, drawing on those quotes and the other sources listed at the end. Scripture quoted in the summaries and deep dives is from the New King James Version, and Q-numbers are question numbers in the ICCEC Catechism.

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This guide follows the Intercessor Church Community Group outline "No One Left Out, Week 4: Which Son Are You?"

A. The Question Beneath the Question (Matthew 21:23-27)

A1. Right after Jesus cleared the temple, the leaders demanded to know who gave Him the right. What were they really protecting, and what kind of authority does Jesus actually hold? (Matthew 21:23-27)

Commentary

- "For since they could not object against the miracles, they bring forward against Him the correction of the traffickers in the temple." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "As our Lord now openly appeared as the Messiah, the chief priests and scribes were much offended, especially because he exposed and removed the abuses they encouraged." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Matthew 21)
- "There was a show of propriety in this question. He was making great changes in the affairs of the temple, and they claimed the right to know why this was done, contrary to their permission." (Barnes' Notes on Matthew 21:23)
- "To them, the popularity and authority of John the Baptist and Jesus appear only as threats to their own status and prestige." (Eunyung Lim, Working Preacher on Matthew 21:23-32)
- "The religious leaders raised the question of Jesus' authority, and He answered by raising the question of their competence to judge such an issue." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)

ICCEC Catechism

- "He received without measure all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and so He possesses in the highest degree the knowledge of a prophet, the holiness of a high priest, and power of a king" (Q-83)
- "Historically Jesus angered the Jewish leadership because they saw Him as committing blasphemy by claiming that He was one with the Father and that He was the Messiah." (Q-112)
- "Because Jesus obediently fulfilled and completed the work of the Father on earth, He has now been given all authority both on earth and in heaven." (Q-124)

Summary

The questioning comes right after Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple and healed the blind and the lame there (Matthew 21:12-16). By the leaders' rules, a teacher needed formal approval, and Jesus had none from them. They could not object to His miracles, so they challenged His right to clean out the temple (Chrysostom). They were offended because He exposed abuses they encouraged (Matthew Henry), and they saw Him as a threat to their own status (Lim). The answer to their question is plain: Jesus has the knowledge of a prophet, the holiness of a high priest, and the power of a king (Q-83), and all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him (Q-124).

Deep Dive

"These things" (21:23) points back to the day before, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, drove out the money changers, and healed the blind and the lame in the temple (21:12-16). Mark adds the scribes to the chief priests and elders (Mark 11:27), so all the groups of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, were there (Ellicott). The right to teach was normally given by the scribes to someone who had studied "at the feet" of a great teacher, and a key was handed over "as the symbol of the right to interpret" (Ellicott). Jesus had no such credentials from them. Matthew 21:23-32 is the Gospel reading in the Revised Common Lectionary for Proper 21, Year A (September 27, 2026).

Read before class: Matthew 21:12-17; John 2:13-22; Matthew 28:18-20

A2. The leaders asked which answer was safe instead of which answer was true. What does their "We do not know" reveal about their hearts? (Matthew 21:24-27)

Commentary

- "Seest thou a perverse heart? In every case they despise God and do all things for the sake of men." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "They answered only after carefully calculating the political consequences of either answer. They didn't seem interested in answering the question honestly, only cleverly." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "They could not say, 'Of men,' for they were cowards. They would not say, 'Of heaven,' for they were hypocrites." (G. Campbell Morgan, as quoted in David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "They were reluctant to admit that character, for this would have involved the necessity of accepting the testimony which he had borne to the work and office of Jesus." (Ellicott's Commentary on Matthew 21:25)
- "Many are more afraid of the shame of lying than of the sin, and therefore scruple not to speak what they know to be false, as to their own thoughts, affections, and intentions, or their remembering and forgetting." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Matthew 21)

ICCEC Catechism

- "To believe in God is to have a lively belief in His being, His attributes, and to receive with all our heart His revealed word for the salvation of men." (Q-49)
- "We are all sinners because our human nature is prone to choose selfish exaltation, powers and pleasures rather than God's will of love for Himself and for each other." (Q-100)

Summary

Instead of asking which answer was true, they asked which answer was safe (21:25-26). They did all things "for the sake of men" (Chrysostom), cowards on one side and hypocrites on the other (G. Campbell Morgan). If they admitted John was from heaven, they would have to accept what John said about Jesus (Ellicott). So "We do not know" (21:27) was not an honest answer but a way to avoid commitment, and in fact a direct falsehood (Barnes). Real faith receives God's word "with all our heart" (Q-49), and the root problem is our tendency to choose self over God's will (Q-100).

Deep Dive

The leaders had "halted between two opinions" about John (Ellicott). Some came out to his baptism (Matthew 3:7), and others said, "He has a demon" (Matthew 11:18). Meanwhile John's death at Herod's hands had only deepened the people's respect for him (Ellicott). Luke records their fear: "all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet" (Luke 20:6). Much was at stake in Jesus' question: if the leaders answered it rightly, they "will already have the correct answer to their own question" (Carson, quoted by Guzik). John had pointed to Jesus as the one "coming after me" who "is mightier than I" (Matthew 3:11), so admitting John was from God meant admitting who Jesus was.

Read before class: Matthew 3:1-12; Matthew 11:7-19; Matthew 14:1-12

A3. We sometimes tell God we will obey once we understand. Where might asking for more answers really be a way of holding back from surrender? (also John 7:17)

Commentary

- "So that if they had believed him, there was nothing to hinder them from knowing by what authority Christ doeth these things." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "A disposition to do His will is a readiness to yield our intellects, our feelings, and all that we have entirely to Him, to be governed according to His pleasure." (Barnes' Notes on John 7:17)
- "if any man, of any nation, seeks to do the will of God, he shall know whether the doctrine is of God, or whether men speak of themselves" (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on John 7)
- "Jesus was under no obligation to give them an answer. They well knew by what authority he did this." (Barnes' Notes on Matthew 21:25)

ICCEC Catechism

- "Knowledge belongs properly to the intellect, although it may also act on the heart; faith belongs principally to the heart, although it is imparted through the intellect." (Q-11)
- "We should read Holy Scripture prayerfully seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, understanding it within the life of the faith community throughout all ages, and with a desire to obey God's will in accordance with His ways." (Q-41)
- "To be 'poor in spirit' is to have a spiritual conviction of complete surrender to God; claiming nothing of our own, except what God bestows upon us." (Q-257)

Summary

This is an application question. Some examples: we may say we will forgive once we understand why it happened, give once our finances are clearer, serve once the timing is right, or follow once every doubt is resolved. Jesus says understanding often follows willingness: "If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine" (John 7:17). That willingness is a readiness to yield our minds and feelings entirely to God (Barnes). The leaders show the same thing: if they had believed John, nothing would have kept them from knowing where Jesus' authority came from (Chrysostom). Faith belongs principally to the heart (Q-11), and we read Scripture with a desire to obey (Q-41).

Deep Dive

The words in John 7:17 mean literally "if any man wills or is willing to do the will of God" (Barnes). Honest questions are not the problem. The psalmist asks, "How long, O LORD?" (Psalm 13:1), and Habakkuk cries, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear?" (Habakkuk 1:2), then waits on God for the answer (Habakkuk 2:1). The difference is whether our questions draw us toward God or keep Him at a distance. When Jesus declined to answer the leaders (21:27), it was because they were not really asking. "It is best to shun needless disputes with wicked opposers" (Matthew Henry).

Read before class: John 7:14-18; Psalm 13; Habakkuk 1:1-4 and 2:1-4

B. Two Sons and Two Responses (Matthew 21:28-30)

B1. One son refused and then went. The other agreed and never went. What is right and what is wrong in each response, and which one sounds more like us? (Matthew 21:28-30)

Commentary

- "The first son refused to work for his father. He didn't want to bend to the father's will. Yet later he regretted it and went. He spoke wrong, but did right." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "The second son said the right thing and he said it with respect (sir), but he did not do what he said he would." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "And it often happens, that the daring rebel is brought to repentance and becomes the Lord's servant, while the formalist grows hardened in pride and enmity." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Matthew 21)
- "To work in the vineyard here represents the work which God requires man to do." (Barnes' Notes on Matthew 21:28)
- "The parable, therefore, confronts the religious leaders with whether they are truly doing the will of the Father." (Eunyung Lim, Working Preacher on Matthew 21:23-32)

ICCEC Catechism

- "First the knowledge of the true God through right faith in Him; Second, a life lived by grace through faith expressing itself in good works." (Q-7)
- "It is inseparable because, as the Holy Scripture testifies, faith without works is dead." (Q-10)
- "That is, He was always obedient to the will of the Father." (Q-108)

Summary

The first son's words were wrong, but his actions were right: he "spoke wrong, but did right" (Guzik). His rudeness is not admirable, but his change of mind is. The second son is polite and agreeable, yet does nothing. The open rebel is often brought to repentance while the formalist grows hard (Matthew Henry). The parable asks the leaders whether they are actually doing the will of the Father (Lim). Faith and works belong together: faith expresses itself in good works (Q-7), faith without works is dead (Q-10), and Jesus Himself was always obedient to the will of the Father (Q-108).

Deep Dive

The father's words in verse 28 hold several details (Guzik). He speaks to each son individually. He calls him "Son," which should make him willing. He asks him to work, not play. He says "today," not someday. And the vineyard is "my vineyard," so it should matter to the son. The vineyard is a familiar picture of God's people (Isaiah 5:1-7), and next week's parable of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-44) uses it again. Both are "sons," not hired

workers, so both the outwardly religious and the openly irreligious are seen, in a sense, as God's children (Ellicott). Some ancient manuscripts reverse the order of the two sons (Lim, Ellicott), but the lesson stays the same.

Read before class: Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 7:21-27; Luke 15:11-32

B2. The second son's polite "I go, sir" cost him nothing. How can respectful words make us look obedient, or even feel obedient, when we are not? (Matthew 21:30)

Commentary

- "The tone of outward respect, as contrasted with the rude refusal of the elder son, is eminently characteristic as representing the surface religion of the Pharisees." (Ellicott's Commentary on Matthew 21:30)
- "The whole human race are like children whom the Lord has brought up, but they have rebelled against him, only some are more plausible in their disobedience than others." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Matthew 21)
- "They talk of repenting, but they do not repent. They speak of believing, but they never believe." (C.H. Spurgeon, as quoted in David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "They keep up the external appearance of religion, but their heart is not right with God." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "their words never translated into action" (Eunyung Lim, Working Preacher on Matthew 21:23-32)

ICCEC Catechism

- "Sin can be committed either actively, by commission (what we do with our lives in thought, word, or deed) or passively, by omission (which means what we fail to do in thought, word, or deed)." (Q-99)
- "We should always seek to do the will of our Lord by trying to fashion our lives after His perfect life, in order to experience the blessedness of His Kingdom now as well as in heaven." (Q-253)

Summary

Polite words cost nothing and can sound like obedience. The second son's respectful reply is a picture of "surface religion" (Ellicott), and some people are simply "more plausible in their disobedience" than others (Matthew Henry). Some people talk of repenting but never repent (Spurgeon, quoted by Guzik). Respectful words can even

make us feel we have already obeyed, because saying yes feels like doing something. Sin includes omission, what we fail to do (Q-99), and we should seek to fashion our lives after Christ's perfect life (Q-253).

Deep Dive

In Greek the second son's answer is just two words, ego, kyrie, literally "I, sir." It can be rendered "Yes, Master," and it "sounds emphatically obedient" (Lim). Kyrie is also the word for "Lord," which links this answer to Jesus' warning in the Sermon on the Mount (Bengel): "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). The second son is like Israel at Sinai, where the people promised, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8), and later broke that promise (Chrysostom). Isaiah describes the same problem: people who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13).

Read before class: Matthew 7:21-23; Exodus 19:3-8; Isaiah 29:13

B3. In which parts of life do our actions tell the truth about us better than our intentions do? (Matthew 21:28-31; also James 1:22-25)

Commentary

- "For the former not having undertaken to obey, neither having become hearers of the law, showed forth their obedience in their works; and the latter having said, 'All that the Lord shall speak, we will do, and will hearken,' in their works were disobedient." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "It is not talking, but walking, that will bring us to heaven." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on James 1)
- "Mere hearers are self-deceivers; and self-deceit will be found the worst deceit at last." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on James 1)
- "What matters is living for God, not saying the right words." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)

ICCEC Catechism

- "Because all authority for judgment has been given to Christ by the Father, we all will stand before Christ and be judged for our thoughts and actions towards God and our neighbor." (Q-127)
- "We are called to pick up our cross and deny ourselves daily by living a sacrificial life through the physical and spiritual works of mercy and grace toward others." (Q-270)

Summary

This is an application question. Actions tend to show the truth in marriage and family (time and attention given, not just promised), friendships (showing up when it is inconvenient), money (where it actually goes), prayer (whether we pray or only plan to), church life (serving, not just attending), and work (keeping our word). The people at Sinai promised to obey and then did not, while the tax collectors and harlots made no promises but obeyed in their works (Chrysostom). It is walking, not talking, that brings us to heaven (Matthew Henry). We will be judged for our thoughts and actions toward God and our neighbor (Q-127), and we are called to daily works of mercy (Q-270).

Deep Dive

James gives a picture of hearing without doing. A man looks at his face in a mirror, then "goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was" (James 1:24). Paul puts it plainly: "not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:13), a verse quoted in a sermon on this parable (Chrysostom). Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount the same way, with two builders who both heard His words; only the one who acted on them built on the rock (Matthew 7:24-27). John adds that love is shown "in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

Read before class: James 1:22-25; Matthew 7:24-27; 1 John 3:18

C. Repentance Changes Direction

C1. The first son regretted his answer and went. What turned his change of mind into real repentance, and why does the going matter? (Matthew 21:29)

Commentary

- "The English translation of the Greek metamelomai does not fully capture its nuance, for metamelomai doesn't simply mean 'on second thought.' It connotes repentance and regret, from which acts of justice and humble service flow." (Eunyung Lim, Working Preacher on Matthew 21:23-32)
- "It is the first stage of repentance, and may, as in this instance, pass on into the higher, or, as in the case of Judas (Matthew 27:3, where the same word is used), end only in remorse and despair." (Ellicott's Commentary on Matthew 21:29)
- "And those are not worthy of the name of penitents, or their privileges, who say they are sorry for their sins, yet persist in them." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Matthew 3)

ICCEC Catechism

- "By the same grace we are caused to grieve for our sin and seek reconciliation and restoration with God." (Q-273)
- "This is obtained through consistent self-examination, repentance, confession (sacramental if necessary) and amendment of life." (Q-273)

Summary

The first son's change is more than a passing second thought, because it shows in what he does: he "went." The Greek word carries repentance and regret, from which action flows (Lim). It is the first stage of repentance (Ellicott). It can grow into real change, as it did here, or end in mere remorse, as it did with Judas, where the same word is used. People who say they are sorry for their sins yet keep doing them do not deserve the name of penitents (Matthew Henry). Grace causes us to grieve for sin and seek reconciliation with God, and this continues through self-examination, repentance, confession, and amendment of life (Q-273).

Deep Dive

The NKJV says the first son "regretted it" (21:29). The Greek word is metamelomai, and it appears only five times in the New Testament (Vincent): twice in this passage (21:29, 32), once of Judas bringing back the silver (27:3), once of Paul not regretting a hard letter (2 Corinthians 7:8), and once of God, who "will not relent" (Hebrews 7:21). The usual word for gospel repentance is a different one, metanoeo, used by John and Jesus: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2). In verse 32 Jesus uses the first son's word against the leaders: they "did not afterward relent and believe him."

Read before class: Matthew 21:28-32; Matthew 27:3-5; 2 Corinthians 7:8-11

C2. Judas felt remorse and Peter wept bitterly. What separates biblical repentance from regret or simply feeling guilty? (also 2 Corinthians 7:10)

Commentary

- "In the NT the subject chiefly has reference to 'repentance' from sin, and this change of mind involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God." (Vine's Expository Dictionary, "Repent, Repentance")
- "the difference between metanoia and metamelomai, illustrated here, is briefly expressed in the contrast between 'repentance' and 'regret.'" (Vine's Expository Dictionary, "Repent, Repentance")

- "There is a great difference between this sorrow of a godly sort, and the sorrow of the world." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on 2 Corinthians 7)
- "Where the heart is changed, the life and actions will be changed." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on 2 Corinthians 7)
- "Deep humility before God, hatred of all sin, with faith in Christ, a new heart and a new life, make repentance unto salvation." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on 2 Corinthians 7)

ICCEC Catechism

- "those who have committed sin come before a priest of the Church seeking forgiveness, reconciliation and amendment of life" (Q-187)
- "Those who are living in notorious sin who are unrepentant and do not intend amendment of life." (Q-191)
- "We can be forgiven through the mediation of Jesus Christ as we confess our sins to God and to one another." (Q-243)

Summary

Regret looks back and feels bad. Repentance turns around. Biblical repentance is a change of mind that involves both turning from sin and turning to God, and there is a clear line between "repentance" and "regret" (Vine's). Paul makes the same distinction: godly sorrow leads to repentance and salvation, while the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10). Where the heart is changed, the life will be changed (Matthew Henry). The sacrament of Confession gives practical help, as we seek forgiveness, reconciliation, and amendment of life (Q-187). Those who do not intend to change are not ready to receive it (Q-191).

Deep Dive

The Greek word for repent, metanoeo, joins meta, "after," implying change, with a root related to nous, "the mind" (Vine's). It means to change one's mind or purpose, and in the New Testament it always means a change for the better. Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their preaching with that word (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). Two disciples show the difference between regret and repentance. Judas "was remorseful" (Matthew 27:3) but did not come back to Jesus. Peter "went out and wept bitterly" after denying Him (Luke 22:62), and Jesus restored him (John 21:15-19). Psalm 51 is David's prayer of repentance and a good one to pray this week.

Read before class: 2 Corinthians 7:8-11; Psalm 51; Luke 22:54-62

C3. In Ezekiel God pleads with His people to turn and live. What does that passage add to our picture of His invitation to repent? (Ezekiel 18:30-32)

Commentary

- "He that is alienated in his heart from God, whatever may have been his previous life, God will judge; and he that now seeks to conform his life to God's will, God will receive and forgive." (Ellicott's Commentary on Ezekiel 18:30)
- "God does not command what cannot be done, but admonishes us to do what is in our power, and to pray for what is not." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Ezekiel 18)
- "People may not bank on a treasury of past good deeds to ensure their future well-being, nor need they despair of a treasury of evil that prevents them from enjoying life." (Daniel Block, as quoted in David Guzik, Enduring Word on Ezekiel 18)
- "To those who presume on the grace of God, it sends a stern warning; to those who despair of life, it offers hope." (Daniel Block, as quoted in David Guzik, Enduring Word on Ezekiel 18)

ICCEC Catechism

- "It is never God's will that a person should perish or be separated from Him and His love." (Q-215)
- "Jesus has come because the Father's love for His people, is so great that He desires that we not perish but have eternal life with Him." (Q-232)

Summary

Ezekiel shows what God wants. He has "no pleasure in the death of one who dies," and He pleads, "Therefore turn and live!" (18:32). Whatever someone's past, God will receive and forgive the one who now seeks to live by His will (Ellicott). We cannot bank on past good deeds, and we need not despair over past sins (Daniel Block, quoted by Guzik). Verse 31 even calls the people to "get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit," and God gives us means and promises so that we can seek this change from Him (Matthew Henry). It is never God's will that anyone perish (Q-215), and the Father's love sent Jesus so we would have eternal life (Q-232).

Deep Dive

Ezekiel preached to Jewish exiles in Babylon, "among the captives by the River Chebar" (Ezekiel 1:1). They had a popular saying: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:2). The proverb was a complaint that they were being punished for what their fathers did (Guzik). Ezekiel 18 answers it: each person is

responsible before God, and each person can turn. The "new heart" of 18:31 becomes God's own promise in Ezekiel 36:26: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you." Peter says the same about God's patience: He is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 is the Old Testament reading paired with this Gospel in the lectionary.

Read before class: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 21-32; Ezekiel 36:25-27; 2 Peter 3:9

D. Performance or Repentance (Matthew 21:31-32)

D1. Why did Jesus say tax collectors and prostitutes were entering God's kingdom ahead of the religious leaders, and what did they have that the leaders lacked? (Matthew 21:31-32)

Commentary

- "For not, as continuing harlots, did they enter in, but having obeyed and believed, and having been purified and converted, so did they enter in." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "In stark contrast stand the tax collectors and prostitutes, who, though regarded among the most despised and dishonorable in society, believe John, repent, and thus enter God's kingdom ahead of them." (Eunyung Lim, Working Preacher on Matthew 21:23-32)
- "The shock value of Jesus' statement can only be appreciated when the low esteem in which tax collectors were held, not to mention prostitutes, is taken into account." (D.A. Carson, as quoted in David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "These proud religionists should have repented all the more when they saw the notorious sinners repenting, but they did not." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "The choice of the word is significant as implying that there was still time for scribes and Pharisees to follow in the rear." (Ellicott's Commentary on Matthew 21:31)

ICCEC Catechism

- "He came to earth for the salvation of all humanity and not for one nation nor for some people only, but for all humanity universally and for each individual's salvation." (Q-96)
- "The Kingdom of God belongs to Christians in the present life inwardly through faith and hope, but also in the life to come at the end of this age." (Q-261)

Summary

Not because sin is unimportant. They did not enter "as continuing harlots," but because they believed, repented, and were changed (Chrysostom). They were among the most despised people in society (Lim), and the shock of Jesus' words can only be felt when we remember how low they stood (Carson). What they had was the one thing the leaders lacked: they believed John and changed. Verse 32 adds that the leaders saw this happen and still "did not afterward relent." Yet the wording leaves room for the leaders to follow (Ellicott). Christ came for the salvation of all people and of each person (Q-96).

Deep Dive

Tax collectors worked for the Roman authorities and were known for taking more than they were owed. When they came to John to be baptized, they asked, "Teacher, what shall we do?" and John told them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you" (Luke 3:12-13). Luke later notes that "even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John," while "the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves" (Luke 7:29-30). Matthew, the tax collector who became an apostle (Matthew 9:9), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-10), and the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:37-50) all come to mind (Ellicott). The phrase for entering "before you" literally means "lead the way into" (Ellicott).

Read before class: Luke 3:7-14; Luke 7:29-30; Matthew 9:9-13

D2. Just before this parable Jesus cursed a fig tree with leaves but no fruit. What is the difference between looking righteous and actually becoming obedient? (Matthew 21:32; also Matthew 21:18-19)

Commentary

- "Israel may have had the leaves of activity, but not the fruit of repentance and obedience to God, which is why Jesus tells them the prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the kingdom ahead of them (v. 31)." (GotQuestions.org, "Parable of the Two Sons")
- "The religious leaders were good at talking righteous talk, but their stubbornly unrepentant hearts showed that repentant sinners would enter the kingdom before them." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "Multitudes, by resting in the honours and mere advantages of their being members of an outward church, come short of heaven." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Matthew 3)

ICCEC Catechism

- "The petition asks that the love of the Father for humanity and all creation be worked in us by the Holy Spirit, so that we are made into the image of Christ, who alone accomplished the will of God in his life, death and resurrection." (Q-233)
- "To worship is to present our bodies, souls, and spirits (our entire being) in ultimate esteem, adoration, worth, honor, and obedience to God and to God alone." (Q-292)

Summary

Just before this, Jesus cursed a fig tree that had leaves but no fruit (21:18-19). It is a picture of religious activity without the fruit of repentance and obedience (GotQuestions). The leaders were good at talking righteous talk (Guzik). Appearing right is about how we look to others. Becoming obedient is about how we respond to God, and it is a process of change over time. Many rest in the advantages of church membership and still come short of heaven (Matthew Henry). The goal is being made into the image of Christ (Q-233), and worship means presenting our entire being in obedience to God (Q-292).

Deep Dive

The fig tree is often a symbol of Israel in the prophets (Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7; GotQuestions). The phrase "the way of righteousness" (21:32) was one the Pharisees themselves used, and it included almsgiving, fasting, and prayer, the three practices Jesus addresses in Matthew 6:1-18 (Ellicott). John practiced all three, yet the leaders did not believe him. Jesus later describes the same gap between outside and inside: "whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones" (Matthew 23:27).

Read before class: Matthew 21:18-22; Matthew 6:1-18; Matthew 23:25-28

D3. The leaders answered Jesus' question correctly and still missed the point. How can church activity or Bible knowledge become a place to hide from God? (Matthew 21:31; also John 5:39-40)

Commentary

- "If a man supposes that by a mere punctual attendance on preaching, or a respectful attention to it, he has done all that is required of him, he is laboring under a most gross self-deception." (Barnes' Notes on James 1:22)
- "If we heard a sermon every day of the week, and an angel from heaven were the preacher, yet, if we rested in hearing only, it would never bring us to heaven." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on James 1)

- "They are sinning against the light, because they know better." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21)
- "This answer was correct; but it is strange that they did not perceive that it condemned themselves." (Barnes' Notes on Matthew 21:28)

ICCEC Catechism

- "We disobey the first commandment by the idolatry of putting any person, place, or thing before God." (Q-289)
- "Those who have not been baptized by water in the name of the Trinity, those living in notorious and unrepentant sin, and those who do not rightly discern the Body and Blood of Christ should not receive the Holy Communion." (Q-182)

Summary

This is an application question. Some examples: we can attend faithfully, know the right answers in a Bible study, serve on a team, or quote Scripture, and still keep one area of life closed to God. The idea that attendance is all God requires is "a most gross self-deception" (Barnes). The leaders were "sinning against the light" because they knew better (Guzik). Notice that the leaders answered Jesus' question correctly (21:31) and still did not see that it applied to them. Knowledge and involvement are good gifts, but they can become a place to hide. Putting any person, place, or thing before God is idolatry (Q-289).

Deep Dive

Jesus told some of the best Bible students of His day, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). Knowing Scripture is good; the problem is using it in place of coming to Christ. Paul warns, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies" (1 Corinthians 8:1). The right way to read Scripture is prayerfully, within the life of the faith community, "and with a desire to obey God's will in accordance with His ways" (Q-41). James calls hearing without doing a way of deceiving ourselves (James 1:22).

Read before class: John 5:39-40; 1 Corinthians 8:1-3; James 1:22-27

E. Humility Makes Obedience Possible (Philippians 2:1-4)

E1. Paul warns against selfish ambition and empty glory. How do those two things keep us from responding to God? (Philippians 2:3)

Commentary

- "Much of what we do is not done out of love for others, but out of our own desire for 'advancement' or 'promotion'" (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Philippians 2)
- "Conceit is thinking too highly of one's self, of having an excessive self-interest and self-preoccupation. It could be more literally translated 'empty glory.'" (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Philippians 2)
- "It means properly empty pride, or glory, and is descriptive of vain and hollow parade and show." (Barnes' Notes on Philippians 2:3)
- "for fear of men they do all things, and for vainglory" (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)

ICCEC Catechism

- "We are all sinners because our human nature is prone to choose selfish exaltation, powers and pleasures rather than God's will of love for Himself and for each other." (Q-100)
- "fell away from Him into self-will, pride and malice" (Q-71, on the fall of the evil angels)

Summary

Selfish ambition keeps us focused on what we gain, and conceit keeps us focused on how we look. Much of what we do comes from our desire for advancement, and conceit literally means "empty glory" (Guzik). Both make it hard to respond to God, because responding means admitting we need Him. The leaders did all things for fear of men and for vainglory, which is exactly why they could not answer Jesus honestly (Chrysostom). We tend to choose selfish exaltation over God's will (Q-100), and the evil angels fell into self-will, pride, and malice (Q-71).

Deep Dive

The word translated "conceit" in Philippians 2:3 is kenodoxia, found only here in the New Testament (Vincent). It joins kenos, "empty," with doxa, a word that came to mean glory (Vincent). A related word appears in Galatians 5:26, where Paul warns against becoming conceited and provoking one another. The phrase "selfish ambition" is better understood

as "faction," a party spirit (Vincent). Paul's answer to both is Jesus, who "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8). Philippians 2:1-13 is the epistle reading paired with this Gospel in the lectionary.

Read before class: Philippians 2:1-11; James 3:13-18; Galatians 5:26

E2. Why is it so hard for pride to admit we were wrong, and how does humility make it possible? (Philippians 2:3)

Commentary

- "Christ came to humble us, let there not be among us a spirit of pride. We must be severe upon our own faults, and quick in observing our own defects, but ready to make favourable allowances for others." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Philippians 2)
- "Neither inward nor outward peace can be enjoyed, without lowliness of mind." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Philippians 2)
- "The apostle knew that, to create concord, you need first to beget lowliness of mind. Men do not quarrel when their ambitions have come to an end." (C.H. Spurgeon, as quoted in David Guzik, Enduring Word on Philippians 2)

ICCEC Catechism

- "It is a conviction that we can do nothing good without God's help and grace, thus counting ourselves as nothing without Him, and in all things throwing ourselves upon the mercy of God. As St. John Chrysostom explains it: 'Spiritual poverty is humility'." (Q-257)
- "To be meek is to have a heart and soul that has by faith received God's grace to live a life disciplined and controlled by His love." (Q-265)

Summary

Pride has to protect its image, so admitting a mistake feels like losing. Humility has nothing to protect. We should be severe with our own faults and ready to make allowances for others (Matthew Henry). People stop quarreling when their ambitions come to an end (Spurgeon). Humility also lets us hear correction from God without feeling crushed. Being poor in spirit means counting ourselves as nothing without God and throwing ourselves on His mercy, and "Spiritual poverty is humility" (Q-257, quoting Chrysostom). Meekness is a heart disciplined and controlled by God's love (Q-265).

Deep Dive

Humility was not admired in the ancient world. The ancient Greeks considered lowliness of mind "to be a fault, not a virtue" (Guzik), and "The Christian ethical idea of humility could not be reached by the secular mind" (Lenski, quoted by Guzik). Christians learned it from Jesus, who said, "I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29). James quotes Proverbs: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector shows humility in prayer, and the one who admitted his sin went home justified (Luke 18:9-14).

Read before class: Matthew 11:28-30; James 4:6-10; Luke 18:9-14

E3. Paul tells us to look out for the interests of others. How does that turn what we say we believe into faithful action? (Philippians 2:4; also verse 5)

Commentary

- "No one is at liberty to live for himself or to disregard the wants of others. The object of this rule is to break up the narrow spirit of selfishness, and to produce a benevolent regard for the happiness of others." (Barnes' Notes on Philippians 2:4)
- "Kindness is the law of Christ's kingdom, the lesson of his school, the livery of his family." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Philippians 2)
- "As we esteem others better, we will naturally have a concern for their needs and concerns." (David Guzik, Enduring Word on Philippians 2)
- "that insight into the thoughts, hopes, aspirations of others, which only a self-forgetting love can give, as well as the care to consider their welfare and happiness" (Ellicott's Commentary on Philippians 2:4)

ICCEC Catechism

- "To be merciful is to love and forgive others as we have been forgiven and loved by Christ Jesus." (Q-270)
- "It is made visible in the Eucharist, in the Church's life of service to the poor, and in his healing and transforming work in the lives of people." (Q-231)

Summary

Paul asks us to look out "also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). Belief becomes action when it moves from what I think to what someone else needs: a meal for a family in crisis, a phone call to someone who is lonely, time with a neighbor, or forgiveness for someone who hurt us. No one is at liberty to live for himself (Barnes), and kindness is the law of Christ's kingdom (Matthew Henry). Esteeming others leads us naturally to care

about their needs (Guzik). Mercy means loving and forgiving others as Christ has loved and forgiven us (Q-270), and the Kingdom is made visible in the Church's service to the poor (Q-231).

Deep Dive

The word for "look out" in Philippians 2:4 means to fix one's attention on something, and it is related to the word for a target or mark (Vincent). The little word "also" matters: Paul does not say our own needs do not matter, only that they must not be the only thing we see (Ellicott). Then Paul gives the model: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan makes the same point. When asked who was the neighbor, the lawyer answered, "He who showed mercy on him," and Jesus said, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

Read before class: Philippians 2:4-8; Luke 10:25-37; 1 John 3:16-18

F. Your First Answer Is Not Your Final Answer

F1. The first son said no before he said yes. What hope does his change of heart offer someone who has put off obeying God? (Matthew 21:29)

Commentary

- "For an evil thing it is not at the first to choose the good, but it is a heavier charge not even to be brought round." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "But let no one be like this; but though he be sunk down to the extremity of wickedness, let him not despair of the change for the better." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "The door was not yet closed against them, though those whom they despised had taken the place of honour and preceded them." (Ellicott's Commentary on Matthew 21:31)
- "They could have become the first son, but they never chose that path." (Eunyung Lim, Working Preacher on Matthew 21:23-32)

ICCEC Catechism

- "This salvation is past, present and future." (Q-97)
- "Hence, the penitent who receives the forgiveness of Christ and his Church is restored to righteousness and fellowship within the Body of Christ." (Q-187)

- "The Kingdom is like a small mustard seed growing into a large tree; it is like yeast working its way through dough." (Q-230)

Summary

The key word is "afterward" (21:29). The first son's first answer was not his last. It is worse never to come around than to refuse at first, and no one, however far gone, should despair of change (Chrysostom). Even for the leaders the door was not yet closed (Ellicott), and they could have become the first son (Lim). The father's request was for "today," and today is still open. Salvation is past, present, and future (Q-97), and the penitent who receives forgiveness is restored to fellowship in the Body of Christ (Q-187).

Deep Dive

Scripture is full of people whose first answer was not their last. King Manasseh was one of Judah's worst kings, yet when he was in affliction he "humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers," and God heard him (2 Chronicles 33:12-13). The prodigal son "came to himself" and went home (Luke 15:17). The list goes on: Rahab, the thief on the cross, Matthew the tax collector who became an evangelist, Paul the blasphemer who became an apostle, and a notorious woman of the fourth century, famous on the stage, who turned to Christ and spent the rest of her life in sackcloth and self-discipline (Chrysostom). Paul calls himself the chief of sinners and says he received mercy as a pattern for others (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Read before class: Luke 15:11-24; 2 Chronicles 33:1-17; 1 Timothy 1:12-16

F2. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, why is that a sign that God is inviting us back, not rejecting us? (also John 16:8; Revelation 3:19)

Commentary

- "God is not as man, for He reproaches us not with the past, neither doth He say, Why wast thou absent so long a time? when we repent; only let us approach Him as we ought." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "But the word, 'go before you,' is not as though these were following, but as having a hope, if they were willing." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "Sorrow according to the will of God, tending to the glory of God, and wrought by the Spirit of God, renders the heart humble, contrite, submissive, disposed to mortify every sin, and to walk in newness of life." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on 2 Corinthians 7)

- "Heavenly beings are thus represented as rejoicing over those who repent on earth." (Barnes' Notes on Luke 15:7)

ICCEC Catechism

- "The work of the Holy Spirit is to bring individuals into a relationship with the Father and the Son, and to empower individuals within the life of the Church for the ministry of the Kingdom." (Q-140)
- "Jesus invites us to return and come into this personal and corporate relationship with God." (Q-224)
- "We ask that God guides us during times of temptation, grants us the grace to see the sin as it is, and mercifully encourages us to make the right decisions and not turn away from Christ." (Q-250)

Summary

Conviction is God speaking to us because He has not given up on us. God does not reproach us with the past or ask why we stayed away so long, and "go before you" is a word of hope: the leaders could still follow if they were willing (Chrysostom). Godly sorrow makes the heart humble and ready to walk in newness of life (Matthew Henry). Rejection would mean silence; conviction means God is still calling. The Holy Spirit's work is to bring us into relationship with the Father and the Son (Q-140), Jesus invites us to return (Q-224), and God grants us grace to see sin as it is (Q-250).

Deep Dive

Jesus said the Holy Spirit "will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). Conviction is one of the Spirit's works, not a sign that God has turned away. The risen Christ says this to a lukewarm church: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19). Hebrews 12:5-11 compares God's correction to a loving father training his children. And Jesus says there is "joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

Read before class: Hebrews 12:5-11; Luke 15:1-10; Revelation 3:19-20

F3. What practical steps help us move from meaning to obey God to actually doing it? (also Philippians 2:12-13)

Commentary

- "Lay hold only on the way that leads thither, and thou wilt advance quickly. Shut not up the doors, close not up the entrance." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)

- "Grace is not consumed, is not spent, it is a kind of fountain springing up constantly; by His fullness are we all healed both soul and body." (John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew)
- "Ordinances and means are appointed, directions and promises are given, that those who desire this change may seek it from God." (Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Ezekiel 18)
- "it is not meant to say that this can ever be the work of any other than God's Holy Spirit; but that Spirit is ever given to them that ask Him" (Ellicott's Commentary on Ezekiel 18:30)

ICCEC Catechism

- "We now dwell in the Holy Spirit in many different ways, but particularly through the sacraments and his Word, by loving one another and through prayer." (Q-139)
- "The Holy Spirit empowers Christians with His presence for service and grants gifts for ministry in the Church and in the world." (Q-141)
- "All can, some should, and some must." (Q-190, on who should receive the sacrament of Confession)

Summary

This is an application question. Some helps: choose one specific step instead of a general resolution; tell someone who will ask you about it; start small and start this week; remove what usually gets in the way; and pray for strength. Paul joins our part and God's part in Philippians 2:12-13. God has given ordinances and means so that those who want to change can seek it from Him (Matthew Henry), and we should lay hold of the way and not shut the door (Chrysostom). The sacraments, the Word, love for one another, and prayer all help us (Q-139), along with the Spirit's empowering presence (Q-141) and Confession, which all can use (Q-190).

Deep Dive

Paul's words hold both sides together: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). We act, and God gives both the desire and the power. These verses close the same epistle reading (Philippians 2:1-13) that begins with Paul's call to humility, so humility and obedience belong together. Jesus promises that the Father will "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him" (Luke 11:13), and Paul describes the Christian life as walking in the Spirit, which produces fruit over time (Galatians 5:16-25).

Read before class: Philippians 2:12-13; Luke 11:9-13; Galatians 5:16-25

Sources

Source	Where to find it
ICCEC Catechism (2014), cited by Q-number	iccec.org PDF
John Chrysostom, Homily 67 on Matthew	Bible Hub
Eunyung Lim, Working Preacher on Matthew 21:23-32	Working Preacher
David Guzik, Enduring Word on Matthew 21 (includes G. Campbell Morgan, D.A. Carson, and C.H. Spurgeon)	Enduring Word
David Guzik, Enduring Word on Philippians 2 (includes C.H. Spurgeon and R.C.H. Lenski) and Ezekiel 18 (includes Daniel Block)	Philippians 2, Ezekiel 18
Matthew Henry, Ellicott, Barnes, Vincent's Word Studies, and Bengel on Matthew 21	21:23, 21:25, 21:27, 21:28, 21:29, 21:30, 21:31, 21:32
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