**Gospel**: Matthew 21:23-32

When he 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?” 24Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and **you did not believe him**, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and **even after you saw it**, you did not change your minds and believe him.

**Message**: Therefore, God

There is an exercise while reading Scripture, to read until God stops you. Early on in my faith journey, I was reading in Philippians when God stopped me. Philippians 2:5. The New American Bible translation reads, “You must have the same **attitude** that was in Christ Jesus.” The New Oxford Annotated Bible and The New Interpreters’ Study Bible state, “Let the same **mind** be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” The Interpreters’ Bible (1956) reads, “Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus.” Paul is imploring the Philippians and us (!) to have this same **inward disposition** (temperament, nature), this openness to the Spirit, that will direct us in all we do, often without our even consciously knowing. Christ is our example. Jesus acted on this same disposition before he **ever** appeared in this world. That inward disposition or nature is humility, knowing that the one who dwells in you is far greater than your self.

Completing the entreaty, Paul inserts the clause, “who being in the **form** of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped/exploited/seized. Jesus’ *being*, his underlying nature, fundamental attributes, was divine. His *form* was not merely his shape or appearance, but the **expression** (manifestation) of what it really is. Christ’s was the same nature as God. The principle of his being was essentially divine. Having this affinity/kinship with God, he **could have** aspired to all the powers and honors of God. Being equal with God was **not** the prize, nor would he seize (take by force) that majestic status on earth to be exploited or used to his own advantage. Jesus put aside all temptation and lowered himself (descended), rather than climbing higher. He “emptied himself” abdicating his divine status and rank, and took on the form of a servant. The Greek term for “form” that Paul uses is not merely **disguising** himself as a servant, he became one. He was not **impersonating** a servant, trying to make people believe he was someone he was not; he **was** a servant. He appeared not as a chief priest or Roman emperor, but as a carpenter, a voluntary act, laboring with his own hands, and during his ministry, relying on the charity of others.

After Jesus’ tirade in the entrance to the Temple overturning the tables of the buyers, sellers and money changers, then **entering** the Temple area to teach, the representatives of the Sanhedrin had to investigate this disturbance. The Temple leaders try to discern who Jesus is (don’t we all), believing **they** have the authority as conferred by the laying on of hands and anointing after years of study. “Who gave **you** this authority?” In other words, “You got some ‘splainin’ to do, Lucy.” The truth would have been, “Actually, I did, because I’m God in human form, come as the promised Messiah.” How would that have gone over with the chief priests and elders? They probably expected him to say (the logical answer) that he was, as of old, like Elijah or Isaiah, a prophet sent by God, which would have opened the debate, and which they felt confident they could win. Jesus chose John the Baptizer, a marginal character, who told the truth about sin and repentance. The people, including the lowest of the low, saw him as a prophet. They believed his call to repentance. In Jewish tradition, the office of prophet was the highest order a human could achieve, other than messiah. Jesus, using the tools of debate of the time, answered the question with the question: *Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men*? Was the message/revelation of John and Jesus true, or did the legitimate truth of God come only through recognized teachers? The leaders heard John’s message, that John’s words and deeds were the **words and deeds** of God, which **did** strike the chord of truth in their hearts, but they chose to ignore him as it undermined their authority.

We humans **do** like to have life on an even keel, at least fairly predictable or routine. We actively resist change, trying to maintain our own comfort zone. What is Jesus asking of us? We see newness in up-and-comers, but wonder/doubt if they are up to the task. Change/reform is such a big task. A good 40 years ago the women of the church had held a ham loaf dinner for decades. They stated emphatically they were tired of doing all the work and wanted the younger crowd to take over. Several of us rose to the challenge saying we could and would do this. They would do the shopping; we would put it all together including the tables and serve. We came into the kitchen ready to make ham loaf, peel potatoes, prepare vegetables only to find our “instructions”: turn the oven on at such-and-such time, and the water for the potatoes. They had done everything; we just needed to turn on the stove and they would be back to mash the potatoes. Letting go is difficult.

Again the question: what is Jesus asking of us? As followers of Christ, we are not to impersonate Christ, but imitate Christ. There was a movie back in the early ‘60’s staring Tony Curtis as “The Great Impostor” based on the life of Ferdinand Waldo Demara. Demara entered the Army with false papers, when he was detected, he faded away and impersonated a monk, later a sailor traveling the world, a prison warden, a teacher and a doctor. He was finally arrested by the Coast Guard. He was not who he said he was. Which of the two sons reflects the attitude of the Chief Priests and Elders? As disciples of Jesus, we are to imitate Christ—try to live **up to** and **into** the challenge of being a **reflection** of Jesus. We adopt Christlike thought and attitude. We are honest with ourselves and with others. Jesus emptied himself of all status and rank (humility) trusting God fully for the mission to which he was sent. We have the right and responsibility to change our minds, like those who initially heard John. We may resist, like the **first** son, like tax collectors and prostitutes, but later come to believe Jesus is the Messiah, change our mind. We become repentant and obedient. True righteousness is in the doing. The “doing” is to make life better for others, not just lip service to God. We are called to help individuals, towns, churches, even governments. We go forward laying aside our pride, repenting of our rebelliousness, trusting God to guide us in all our ways, reminding us ever to be imitators of Christ, humble and obedient, therefore unto God. The Lord be with you. Amen.

**Prayers of the People**: Almighty God, save us from being self-centered in our prayers and teach us to remember to pray for others with a sincere heart. May we be so bound up in love with those for whom and with whom we pray that we may feel their needs as acutely as our own. We intercede for them with sensitiveness, with understanding and with imagination through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Benediction**: The power of God’s indwelling presence heal you of body, mind, spirit and relationships, that you may serve God with a loving heart. Go in God’s peace. Amen.

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: O God, in mystery and silence you are present in our lives, bringing new life out of destruction, hope out of despair, growth out of difficulty. Thank you for not leaving us alone, but labor to make us whole. Help us to perceive your unseen hand in the unfolding of our lives, the blessings of these gifts offered to you this day, and to attend to the gentle guidance of your Spirit and to know the joy you give to your people. Amen.

**Old Testament**: Ezekiel 18:1-32

The word of the Lord came to me: 2What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? 3As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 4Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die. Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 26When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. 27Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. 28Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. 29Yet the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

30Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. 31Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

**New Testament**: Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. 9Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.