

# “The Upside of Giving Up”

Matthew 21:23-32, Proper 21-A  
September 28, 2014

**Mudslinging, of course, is nothing new! One of the best ways to make yourself look better in the eyes of the world is to do everything in your power to make your opponent look worse!** You may even make him look worse than he really is; but you claim it’s always justifiable because your whole goal is to make him look worse than you! Mudslinging is nothing new and if you don’t believe it then just turn on your television set during the last four weeks preceding a national election!

Mudslinging is one of the major tactics that “the chief priests and the elders of the people” (v. 23) were using against our Lord Jesus. They wanted to discredit him in the eyes of the general population; especially since his approval rating had now risen to an **all-time high and was, in fact, completely off the charts!**

Friends, the episode in our Gospel lesson today takes place in one of those outer “porches” or “porticos” of the temple somewhere in the middle of that first Holy Week. Just two days before this, on that first Palm Sunday, our Lord Jesus rode into the city streets of Jerusalem on a donkey, while receiving shouts of praise by countless Passover pilgrims who had lined the streets. In their elation they were shouting: **“Hosanna, to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 21:9)!**

And on the following day, Monday, Jesus walks into the temple and there he drove out all those who were “buying and selling in the temple, and turned upside down the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those selling doves” (Matthew 21:12). He said to them, “It is written, ‘My (Father’s) house shall be a ‘House of Prayer’ (Isaiah 56:7), but you are making it into a den of thieves!” (Matthew 21:12-13; Isaiah 56:7). And it was only five or six days before that first Palm Sunday that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead and the good news of this mighty “sign,” as St. John refers to it, was spreading everywhere.

A day or two later Jesus is then found teaching a great crowd of people in the temple. And the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to Jesus and ask him: **“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? (v. 23)”** Their question is clear. They want to know who had given Jesus the right to be doing all these things that he was now doing! They were saying, **“SHOW US YOUR CREDENTIALS!”** All of this was an attempt to embarrass Jesus.

**If our Lord admitted that he had no credentials, the religious leaders were hoping that his present fans would lose all respect for him.** On the other hand, if he claimed to be given his authority from God, they could charge him with blasphemy! But our Lord Jesus, in addition to being the only-begotten Son of God, descended from the Father’s throne to reveal the Word and will of his Heavenly Father to us is also **“One Very Sharp Cookie!”**

Jesus always knew how to put the ball back into his opponent’s court. Jesus always knew how to prevent himself from being placed into a defensive posture. So Jesus, as he often does, answers their question with a question of his own. *“I too have a question to ask you. If you give me the answer, I will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John (the Baptist), where did it come from, from heaven or from men?”*(Matthew 21:24-25)

In response to Jesus' counter-question his opponents were suddenly **backed into a corner**. They were between "a rock and a hard place!" And Matthew is very straightforward in sharing with us their dilemma: *"If we say, 'From heaven,' then Jesus will say to us, 'Why, then, did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men, we are afraid of the people, for they all consider John the Baptist to be a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' He, in his turn, then said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things'"* (Matthew 21:25-27).

*"So what do you think?"* Jesus asked his listeners (v. 27). In other words, what is your opinion? *"A man had two sons and he said to them both: **"Go work in my vineyard!"** The first son answered, **"I will not,"** but afterward changed his mind and went. And the second son said, **"I will go, sir!"** but did not go! Which of the two did the will of his father?"* (Vv. 28-31)

**Obviously, it was the first son, the one who actually went and worked in the vineyard, though he said initially that he wouldn't, but who ended up changing his mind or more accurately, who ended up having his mind changed and went and did the will of the Father.**

**In the Parable of the two sons, both sons are in their own way disobedient and disrespectful of their father. The call of God to us in this parable is for each of us to continuously examine our own lives and to give up the natural tendency that we may all have because of our sinful nature, to be a people of God who say one thing and do another.**

**Vince Lombardi was an American football player, coach and executive who is best remembered as the head coach of the Green Bay Packers during the 1960s, when he led his team to five NFL championships.** Two of those five championships resulted in the Packers going on to win the Super Bowl; their first win was in 1966 and second was in 1967.

Vince Lombardi is remembered for having said and done many things, but some of his best remembered words are these: *"Winners never quit and quitters never win!"* May I say that again? Vince Lombardi one day said, *"Winners never quite and quitters never win!"* And, of course, we probably all know the good point that Mr. Lombardi was trying to make one day. Vince Lombardi was trumpeting a never-say-die attitude that many times results in a person's eventual success at whatever it is they are pursuing in their lives. Vince Lombardi's words were closely related to that other old adage: *"If at first you don't succeed, try and try and try again!"*

Certainly Mr. Lombardi's words have merit, but are they always true, are they? Isn't there also, at times, an upside to giving up?

We all have bad habits as we like to call them. We all have sins that we are more prone to commit, perhaps, than are others, who are tempted to commit sins that may hardly be a temptation for us at all. For some people taking the name of the Lord in vain is a frequent occurrence, while others think nothing of being irregular in their church attendance. We can defy those whom God in his sovereignty has placed in authority over us. We can abuse ourselves and our bodies by eating unhealthy foods constantly and by consuming too much drink. We can fail to take care of another person's property entrusted to us. We can gossip about others while tooting our own horns. We can covet other people possessions and good fortune so much that we end up being miserable over what they have that we don't, never taking time out to see what we may have in our lives that they don't.

We can sometimes assume too much responsibility for other people, and in doing so encourage them to become too dependent on us while fostering a spirit of irresponsibility within them.

How do we find the proper balance of helping others in a truly helpful way without enabling them to abdicate responsibilities for their own lives that should be rightly theirs?

Paul perhaps diagnosed his own situation very correctly in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans one day when he wrote: *"I don't understand my own actions, for I can will what is right but I can't always do it. For the good that I would do, I don't do and the evil that I don't want to do is the very thing, so often, that I end up doing. O wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death?"*

Then Paul writes: "Thanks, be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

When John the Baptist appeared on the horizon he called people to repentance through his fierce preaching of the law of God. But he also offered them great comfort in offering to them his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins!

"Which of the two did the will of his father that day" (v. 31)? Who was the real winner that day?

"The first," answer the chief priests and the elders. They grasp that the son who quits what he is doing and goes out to work in the vineyard is the real winner.

Discovering exactly what you need to do, and then doing it, is the upside of giving up! *"Truly I tell you," says Jesus to the religious leaders, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into heaven ahead of you!"* (v. 31)

**"WHAT?" SNORTED THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND THE ELDERS! PEOPLE LIKE THAT CAN'T BE WINNERS!**

But our Lord Jesus Christ dared to disagree with them: *"For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him,"* explains Jesus, *"but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him"* (v. 32). These folks saw the truth of what John was saying, and they discovered exactly what they needed to do.

But what did the chief priests and the elders do? *"Even after they saw that tremendous mass of people gathering down by the Jordan River, confessing their sins, and receiving John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins,"* the chief priests and the elders **continued to remain completely oblivious really—to everything that was happening under the direction of God's Spirit down there!** The priests and the elders, in their own spiritual blindness, were so sure that they were the winners that they did not see a need to quit doing what they were doing, to change their minds, moreover, to have their minds changed by God and believe that what John the Baptist was telling them was true!

**FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL SUNDAYS, YOU AND I ARE GOING TO LEARN HOW RELENTLESS THESE RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONTINUED TO BE IN THEIR NUMBER ONE GOAL TO DISCREDIT JESUS AND TO TURN THE TIDE OF PUBLIC OPINION TOTALLY AGAINST HIM.** St. Matthew tells us that soon after this that the **PHARISEES TRIED TO ENTRAP**

**JESUS** with their ominous question: *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* But they did not outsmart Jesus, the human embodiment of God's own great wisdom. Then the **SADDUCEES CAME TO HIM WITH THEIR ERRONEOUS STORY** about a man who died leaving his widow childless, whose seven brothers each had to take her as their own wife, though she outlived them all. They asked Jesus, *"In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be?"* And Jesus responded: *"None of them. For in the resurrection, people neither marry nor are given in marriage!"*

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees they decided that they would take one more crack at it. *Yes, they asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment of all God's commandments, yet Jesus again answers that question perfectly. The first is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And then Jesus said the second greatest is much like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself!"*

**BUT JESUS GOES ON TO DO A REPEAT OF THE ACTION WE SEE HIM TAKING IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON TODAY. HE ASKED THE PHARISEES A QUESTION:** *"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?"* They said to him, *"The son of David."* He said to them, *"How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying in Psalm 110: "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet? If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"* No one was able to give Jesus an answer; nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions!" (Matthew 22:42-46)

All throughout history, many people have experienced great success precisely because they did quit one thing and move on to something else. **ABRAHAM LINCOLN** quit being an owner of a general store to enter politics. **HARRISON FORD** quit working as a licensed carpenter when he was offered a part in that 1977 movie entitled "Star Wars!" **JULIA CHILDS** quit being a CIA intelligence officer and became a world-famous cook.

Moreover, in the New Testament St. Matthew tells us that **JESUS** *"left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea,"* where he began his ministry (Matthew 4:13). **SIMON PETER AND ANDREW** abandoned their commercial fishing business to follow Jesus fulltime (Matthew 4:20). **SAUL** quit *"breathing our murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord"* to become an apostle (Acts 9:1-22).

Clearly, quitters sometimes do win, when they discover the upside of giving up. And just as the tax collectors and prostitutes gave up all attempts at self-righteousness and confessed their sins openly and boldly to God and received the forgiveness of sins, so he long for each one of us to do the same thing that we might receive his forgiveness by his grace through faith in his Son Jesus Christ today, we do well to do the same thing!

Jesus did his best to encourage the scribes and the Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders to do the same, especially when he tells that other parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector who went into the temple one day to pray: *The Pharisee stood there and publicly boasted out loud to God how thankful he was that he was not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this poor tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all my income. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* Jesus continues: *"I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted!"* (Luke 18:9-14)

Friends, many years ago, back in the 1950s, a pastor was traveling on a Greyhound Bus down a bumpy road. Seated next to him was a college student who noticed that this pastor was reading his Bible. After they cordially exchanged hellos and briefly introduced themselves to one another, the pastor asked the young man, "Are you ready for the temptations that you will face in college?"

“I don’t have a problem with temptation,” the young man told the minister. “I have strong willpower!”

This is when the minister took a pencil out of his shirt-pocket and said, “I can make this pencil stand up on the cover of this Bible even though our bus is going down this very bumpy road!”

The young man said, “I’ll believe it when I see it. I don’t think you can do it!”

“Look! I’m doing it!” the pastor replied as the young man watched.

“Yeah, but you didn’t tell me you would hold the pencil up with your hand!”

“I didn’t have to tell you,” the pastor continued. “Have you ever seen a pencil stand up on its own without someone holding it?”

The minister then let go of the pencil, which instantly fell over. “The only reason you stand,” the pastor said to the college student, “is because God is holding you up with his hand! If God were to remove his hand of protecting grace, you like all of us, would immediately fall into sin.

**Humility is depending completely on God, realizing that he upholds us by his grace!” (Romans 5:2)**

And isn’t this the message we need to continually bring to one another! Why just listen to St. Paul in our epistle lesson today! *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others! (Philippians 2:1-4). Amen*