

Who Said You Could Change Your Mind?  
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Matthew 21:23-32 (the Message)

<sup>23</sup> Then he was back in the Temple, teaching. The high priests and leaders of the people came up and demanded, “Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?”

<sup>24-25</sup> Jesus responded, “First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I’ll answer yours. About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?”

<sup>25-27</sup> They were on the spot and knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered, “If we say ‘heaven,’ he’ll ask us why we didn’t believe him; if we say ‘humans,’ we’re up against it with the people because they all hold John up as a prophet.” They decided to concede that round to Jesus. “We don’t know,” they answered.

Jesus said, “Then neither will I answer your question.

<sup>28</sup> “Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, ‘Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.’

<sup>29</sup> “The son answered, ‘I don’t want to.’ Later on he thought better of it and went.

<sup>30</sup> “The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, ‘Sure, glad to.’ But he never went.

<sup>31-32</sup> “Which of the two sons did what the father asked?”

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said, “Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God’s kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn’t care enough to change and believe him.

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### Food-Not-Bombs

Have you ever heard of it? Food-Not-Bombs is a non-profit, all-volunteer movement in nearly 1,000 communities in at least 65 countries. Food Not Bombs was formed by eight anti-nuclear activists at the May 24, 1980 occupation attempt of the Seabrook Nuclear Power Station in Seabrook, NH. Food Not Bombs works to end hate, war, poverty, hunger and the destruction of the environment.

They provide vegan food and do not serve meat or other animal products as a way to avoid complicity with the exploitation of the workers and the cruel and violent conditions of the animal agriculture industry and to reduce our impact on the climate crisis.

Food Not Bombs has provided food and material relief to the survivors of the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake in San Francisco, the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy as well as Typhoon Yolanda (2013 Philippines), the Christmas Tsunami in 2004, and the 2019 floods in Thaton, Myanmar.<sup>1</sup>

Phillip Picone, 66 is a volunteer with Food-Not-Bombs. This past March he went to the Houston Central Library with four pounds of his customary penne and rigatoni pasta with marinara sauce, ready to share it with many of the homeless who congregate near the library. He's been volunteering to feed the hungry every week for the past 12 years with Food-Not-Bombs.

This night however was different. He had wrestled whether he should show up or not because the previous week, the Houston police had cited a Food-Not-Bombs volunteer for feeding the homeless. He showed up nonetheless deciding to not let city officials intimidate him. He happily served his pasta and when he was done, an officer promptly ticketed him.

A decade ago, the city of Houston passed ordinance 20-254, which made it unlawful for an individual or organization to provide *charitable food services* at an outdoor location not owned, leased or controlled by the individual or organization providing the food.<sup>2</sup>

You're not authorized to feed the hungry.

And why not? Well, according to the city attorney, "It is a health and safety issue...." and there had been an increase in complaints and "incidents" regarding the homeless people congregating near the library. *We have to look out for the best interests of Houston's residents.* Since the ordinance was passed many organizations stopped feeding the homeless out of fear of fines and legal costs.

Phillip Picone became one of dozens of cases being prosecuted against volunteers violating the ordinance and the city has no plans to stop.

How do you get folks to change their minds.

In July, Picone went before a jury and his case was dismissed, but four weeks after he got his citation, he filed a federal lawsuit against the officer who gave it to him. Picone is challenging the constitutionality of the ordinance, alleging that in enforcing it, the officer violated his right to free speech and free exercise of religion. The city responded by saying that Picone could serve food to the homeless, as long as he did it at the city's only designated location for providing charitable food. Picone is moving forward with his case.<sup>3</sup>

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The chief priests and elders, those with power and authority, challenged Jesus – "Who authorized you to teach here? Show us your credentials."

**WHY** did they need credentials and to validate his authority? Was what Jesus teaching wrong or inaccurate? Were they simply giving him a hard time? We know the answers to these questions, but they were harassing him specifically because the religiously powerful, (i.e. city officials) had said only those ordained by a rabbi can teach?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://foodnotbombs.net/new\\_site/events.php](http://foodnotbombs.net/new_site/events.php)

<sup>2</sup> [https://library.municode.com/tx/houston/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=COOR\\_CH20FODR\\_ARTVCHFOSE\\_S20-252USPRWICOPR](https://library.municode.com/tx/houston/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COOR_CH20FODR_ARTVCHFOSE_S20-252USPRWICOPR)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/08/09/houston-food-not-bombs-acquitted/>

Jesus resisted – pushed back against their “rules” and taught anyway. And when confronted by the “authorities” he did what he did so well – played their game and called their bluff, “I’ll answer your question, if you answer mine.”

#### DID THE BAPTISM OF JOHN COME FROM HEAVEN OR WAS IT OF HUMAN ORIGIN?

They clearly accepted his challenge and huddled up to discuss and debate among themselves. What does the scripture tell us? They couldn’t say of heaven because that would mean.... And they couldn’t say from humans because that would mean.... Do you notice that they don’t **actually talk about the question posed?** They talk about the consequences depending on HOW they answer. We can surmise what they think, but in this passage, it doesn’t specifically disclose whether they believed John’s Baptism was of heaven ... or of humans. They didn’t care about the answer, just the consequences. And that’s why, when they concede and say, “we don’t know,” that Jesus bothers with offering the parable.

You see, when they said, “we don’t know” and Jesus said, “fine, since you can’t answer my question, I won’t answer yours,” he could have left it at that. But he didn’t – he was a teacher after all. He offered the parable of the father and his two sons.

- Son #1, go out today and work in the vineyard.
- No, I don’t think so. (But later he changed his mind and went out and worked for his father).
- Son #2, go out today and work in the vineyard.
- Ok. (But he didn’t go).

Tell me, chief priests and elders, which son did his father’s will?

They immediately said, “the first!” They didn’t need to pause, huddle, discuss it amongst themselves before giving an answer. Why? Because they were focused on what the answer was and not the consequences of the answer. They knew the right answer, they knew what to do and yet they weren’t doing it.

The father in the story is God.

The vineyard represents the work of religious renewal, rekindling and repair for those uneducated, lost or abandoned in faith and spirit.

The first son represents John and other religious figures like, even Jesus, not born into religious service but came into authority or ordination later in life. They may not have gotten their first, but eventually they did. The second son represents the chief priests and elders who got their authority and then refused to do the work. They were more concerned with checking credentials and policing who and what was being said.

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This scripture presents us with the topic of authority. Who has it and how do people and organizations get it. These can be answered easily sometimes, but clearly not at all times – and that’s because the answers get wrapped up in feelings, emotions – in doing the work of critically thinking and fact checking - in legalities and politics.

Once the questions are asked and the discussions happen, decisions need to be made – who are you going to listen to? Who are you going to follow? In what – in whom, will you believe and place your trust? Phillip Picone

trusted obeyed his faith over Houston's city officials concerning feeding the hungry --- because hungry people were eating.

Think about this:

- John was wearing a shirt made of hair, eating wild locusts and honey, and roaming the wilderness talking about this new way of living and believe in the God of Israel according to this guy named Jesus.
- The chief priests, conversely, had certifiable educations, likely dressed in the finest robes of their time, they followed social norms and did their work from the synagogue (not out among the trees). And they preached and taught a faith that everyone knew – “the way that things had always been done.”

Who are you doing to follow? How will you decide?

- In opinions and gossip you've heard
- Your gut?
  - (I don't know why I believe what I believe, but I just do; I can't put my finger on it, but my gut tells me...)
- In facts, traditions?
- In the status quo and the way of the social norm – “everybody's doing it!”
- In what you see with our own eyes?

When Jesus speaks about authority, he talks about outcomes and fruits. Look at what John has done? While you wouldn't even talk with tax collectors and prostitutes, John has willingly, happily and readily entered into relationship with them, reminded them that they **are** God's children. And what happened – those that society has vilified and discarded; John has helped to rekindle their faith.

The chief priests and elders were offering a fruitless religion, while John the Baptism and Jesus were offering a way of living that was radically loving and produced beautiful, delicious fruits. The naked were clothed, the unhoused were cared for and hungry people ate. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us, “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

Jesus reminds us that we can be like another version of the first son in the parable. When it comes to determining, interpreting and making decisions about authority – who and what to believe and follow, we can say no. We can doubt, consider, and discern.

The mind of Christ, God, is benevolent, flexible and forgiving. God can and does change their mind, so that confirms that grace and mercy are afforded to us to do the same. The gospel isn't going anywhere. God, Jesus and the Spirit are eternal and available to us always. And sometimes we just need time...time to see the good that comes of things.

It's okay to change your mind.

AMEN