

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

What Does Jesus See? Third Week of Advent Tuesday, December 15, 2015 8:15 AM
Zep 3:1-2, 9-13; **Ps 34:2-3, 6-7, 17-18, 19, 23;** **Mt 21:28-32** (Is our yes really a yes?
That's the question.)

“Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe in him.”

This is a time of turbulence in the life of the people. In a way, Jesus is causing more turbulence. **The psalm we just read is how the Lord will help the poor**, and Israel thought of itself as the poor. So going back to the time of exile when the empire of Babylon took all the people away, or at least most of the people away, and settled them in Iraq, in the long period of time called the **Babylonian Exile**—it was only fifty years, but fifty years when people's life expectancy was thirty years was a long time.

And during that time, **they suffered great self-doubt**: Why did God do this? And they were convinced God did it. They did not have the idea that, well, this is free will in play. They thought God determined everything, at least in regard to themselves. **They understood the promise that they would be protected if only they kept the covenant**. Now they thought they had kept the covenant, and so they were very much disturbed by the appearance of God abandoning them. And this led to **redoubled efforts to live a life of holiness according to the code as they found it**, the priestly code of separation from the world, from the gentile: **cleanliness and purity and hygiene in every area of life**, not just for the priest now, but for everybody.

So since this is the understanding of what God is wanting, and this is their understanding of how God works, and they believe they are following what God wants, **Jesus comes and throws a wrench into their whole understanding because he is now associated with tax collectors**. Well, tax collectors are evil for two reasons. **They are collaborators with the gentiles, so that violates the laws of purity**. Second of all, **they are not poor**. “The Lord will save the poor,” it

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

says in the psalm. They believe that, but the tax collectors were rich. “The Lord hears the cry of the poor.” Well, that excludes the tax collector. So tax collectors are excluded for two reasons: their impurity and their wealth. But Jesus says **they are entering the kingdom of God.** It’s very hard to understand how disruptive this message is. But what Jesus means by the kingdom of God is something they scarcely could imagine. What is it? Can we imagine it? Do we imagine it? **Do we have a sense of what this is about? It’s not so simple.**

The second group, prostitutes: prostitutes have lived during the entire history of human civilization as a despised class of people, this seen as the lowest of the low. Jesus says, oh, **“The prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven before you are,”** you paragons of virtue, you models of holiness, you scholars of the Law, Law meaning the Torah, the word of God. **So how does this figure? That’s the question, and there is no simple answer.** But the answer he intimates is the story of the two sons, in which one son says “yes,” but doesn’t do anything, and the other son says “no,” but regrets that, and goes forth. It’s the only clue we have to how **Jesus** looks at this matter. He sees something that we might not see in his audience, in his followers, even though they be prostitutes or tax collectors, even though they be privileged members of society. Tax collectors were really privileged members of society. **What does he see? How does that apply to us? Is our “yes” really a yes? That’s the question.**