

Week 10 – The Two Sons – Matthew 21:28-32

Scripture Reading: 2Samuel 12:1-13

Introduction

If political debates teach us anything, they teach us that there is a big difference between saying and doing

Advocating for policies and positions is far easier than actually getting them successfully implemented

As the old saying goes, “Talk is cheap”

The problem is that many people have come to believe that simply talking about things is the same as actually doing something

And, really who can blame them?

Today, people who say the “right” things or publicly proclaim ideas that are viewed as “orthodox” are pretty much free to live however they please and are rarely called upon for failing to live according to the standard they espouse

As an example, we see celebrity after celebrity boarding their private jets to go to a global warming event where they wail about the use of fossil fuels while completely ignoring the amount of extra carbon they are putting into the atmosphere just getting to their conference by not traveling commercially or, better yet, telecommuting to it

We have created a culture where talk seems to be more important than action

And your words and demeanor alone effectively insulate you from criticism

Once again we see that there is nothing new under the sun as the author of Ecclesiastes wisely proclaimed and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were guilty of saying one thing while doing another

Our parable this morning is found in **Matthew 21:28-32** and it is one of three parables that Jesus told in answering some of the challenges posed by those religious leaders who were opposed to him and his ministry

We see those questions posed in **Matthew 21:23** where the religious leaders asked Jesus as he was teaching the people:

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

Of course, the implication was that they *were* the authorities and they knew Jesus hadn’t gotten permission from them

But Jesus knew what they were up to so rather than answer them directly he answered by asking them whether John the Baptist's authority was from God or from man

The religious leaders recognized the trap that Jesus had set for them and how either answer would not go well for them so they sought to extricate themselves by saying they didn’t know

Since they would not answer him honestly, Jesus told them that he wouldn’t tell them by what authority he was ministering and teaching – by which he meant he wouldn’t answer their questions directly

But he did answer them parabolically as he launched into the series of three parables of which our parable this morning is the first

If you haven’t done so already, please join me in Matthew 21 and follow along as I read verses 28-32 (**Matt. 21:28-32**)

28“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ **29**And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. **30**And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. **31**Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. **32**For 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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

For those of you taking notes, we will begin by looking at the **essence** and **explanation** of the parable

Then we will take some time to consider the **application** of the parable

I. The Essence and Explanation of the Parable

On its surface, the parable is actually quite easy to understand

A man has two sons and he goes to each of them separately and tells them to go to work in his vineyard

The first son very bluntly says he will not go but later changes his mind and actually does go

While the second son says that he will go but in the end does not

And then Jesus asks which son actually did the will of his father with the obvious answer being the first son

So we see that the essence or main idea in the parable is that even imperfect obedience is better than disobedience

I believe we would all agree that a father has the right to expect labor from his sons and that there is nothing at all out of line with the father commanding his sons go to work for him

We aren't told the ages of the sons but by looking at their responses I suspect they may well have been teenagers

The teen years are often a time when whatever a parent wants is the last thing the kid wants

Maybe they just wanted to watch TV or play video games all day or something because it's obvious that neither of them really wanted to go out to the vineyard and work

The first son who says "no" but ultimately goes reminds me of the story one of my long-ago neighbors liked to share about himself

When he was a teen he was upstairs when his mom called up to tell him to do something or another and he said he answered, "I'll do it when I'm ready" only to have his dad appear at that very moment from around the corner

And without missing a beat the kid continued, "And, boy, am I ready!" as his initial reluctance turned to obedience

The second son reminds me of the character Eddie Haskell [EddieHaskell.jpg] from the old TV show Leave it to Beaver

Eddie always said the right things in the most polite way possible when he was talking to one of the Cleaver parents but his true intentions were never as they seemed – he was the quintessential flattering phony

And that's what I see in the second son in our parable as he goes so far as to refer to his father as, "sir" as he immediately says he will go but then doesn't actually go

Whereas the first son spoke very disrespectfully to his father the second son said the right thing and he said it in the right way and with proper deference to his father but both sons soon demonstrated they didn't mean what they said

And the point of the parable is so clear that when Jesus asked, "Which of the two did the will of his father?"

His audience of religious notables immediately answered, "*The first*"

Jesus then gave **the explanation of the parable**

In effect, Jesus did the same thing that Nathan did as soon as David gave the intended response to the story of the poor man with the ewe lamb when he revealed to David, "*You are the man!*"

David had unwittingly pronounced himself guilty and sentenced himself to death

Likewise, the religious leaders of Jesus' day clearly demonstrated that they understood that being obedient to the Father's demands required more than lip service

And that is the main point of the parable – that your actions are far more important than your words

What a shock it would have been to the religious notables to be told that tax collectors and prostitutes were represented by the first son and that they themselves were represented by the second son

There are two kinds of people who fail to do the Father's will

There are those— such as the tax collectors and prostitutes Jesus mentions – who don't have time for God

They reject the whole notion of obedience to God as some sort of religious peculiarity that they don't subscribe to

We are still surrounded by those people in various forms –people who just don't see obedience to God as something that concerns them because they know very well that they aren't God's kind of people

Then there are those who say all the right things but who fail to do anything – represented by the religious authorities
There are still many in the churches today who readily proclaim they believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God and that they hold its teachings in the highest esteem

They will be the first to trumpet the value of the Father’s work and how worthy it is

But they are like the fig tree that Jesus cursed in the passage just a bit before this one in **Matthew 21:18-19**

That tree was full of lush, green leaves but had no fruit – it was all show but completely devoid of worthwhile substance

And so are those who are like the second son – full of flattery and uttering the right words but doing nothing

The illustration

Then in **verse 32**, Jesus turned to the circumstance that served to illustrate his point

He said, *“For 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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.”*

Of course, the John that Jesus is speaking of here is his cousin, John the Baptist who came preaching repentance and baptizing with the baptism that was a public profession of a person’s repentance

Look with me at **Matthew 3:1-10** –

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The ones who were actually repenting and preparing for the arrival of the Messiah were those who were conscious of their sins

Jesus says they were the *“tax collectors and prostitutes”*

Perhaps that’s because they were able to readily recognize their need for repentance and forgiveness

C.S. Lewis [CSLewis.jpg] is quoted as having said:

“Prostitutes are in no danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God: the proud, the avaricious, the self-righteous, are in that danger.”

And that was true of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day – they were confident in the righteousness they believed came from their position alone

And Jesus reminds them that even when they saw the repentance of those they considered the lowest of the low; even then, they refused to change their minds and believe what John was telling them

They simply would not have seen themselves in the same class as those people

After all, they wore all the right trappings and said all the right things as we see in **Matthew 23:1-3** –

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”

They knew and taught the truth but they believed knowing and teaching was enough so they ignored John's warnings and pleas to repent

Look with me also at **Luke 7:29-30** where Jesus says –

*"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, **but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.**)*

Scripture doesn't tell us this but it seems logical to me based on human nature that seeing the tax collectors and prostitutes repenting likely made the resistance to John's baptism all the stronger to the religious leaders

After all, those were the bad people and they needed to repent

There was no way that the religious leaders would ever put themselves on the same plane as tax collectors and prostitutes by following their example – it wouldn't even occur to them

A few minutes ago we looked at the first three verses of **Matthew 23** but look what **verses 4-7** have to say about them –

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

Anyone who observed the religious elite would have thought that they were God's champions just as anyone who witnessed only the verbal responses of the two sons to their father's command to work would have thought the second son to be far more honoring to his father than the first son

The way Jesus told the parable causes us to have one view of the sons based on what they said and the opposite opinion when their actions are exposed

The religious leaders would not have suspected that the first son would be the hero and the second son the goat and that they would be revealed to be like the second son in Jesus' parable

Everything about the chief priests and elders served to convince those who saw them – and likely themselves in the bargain – that they were doing well for God

I can even imagine them preening and strutting thinking that those vile sinners who went to John were actually repenting because their righteous example had influenced them

But for all their high words and pretensions they *"rejected the purpose of God for themselves"*

And they laid heavy burdens on others that they themselves were unwilling to bear – Jesus says they wouldn't lift a finger to move them

They knew the Law inside and out and they talked about it incessantly and they insisted that others follow the arcane and complicated rules they themselves established all to maintain a false aura of godliness

But it was all for show and their words and deeds served to hide the fact that they were disobeying the Father just like the second son in our parable did

And with this parable, Jesus states the truth again in a slightly different way that **many of those who are last in this present world will be first in the kingdom and the first will be last**

So, if the main idea of the parable is that what we do is more important than what we say

And if how we respond to God in this life determines our place in his kingdom; what lessons can we glean from this parable that will benefit us today?

II. The Application of the Parable

I think it's pretty clear that the parable at least in part deals with **salvation**

The church leaders were guilty of rejecting the Messiah and therefore if they came into the kingdom at all, would come in after many who they and the rest of society looked down on as unworthy sinners

And as we have seen when we looked at some of the previous parables there have always been those in the church who are only paying lip-service to God

They may well pay homage to all the correct doctrines and say all the right things in just the right way and have all the trappings of true religion but they have never actually yielded themselves to God – it's all for show

As one commentator put it: *They do lip service to what they find in God's Word but not **life** service*

When we looked at the parable of the soils in Matthew 13 we saw Jesus reveal the truth that not everyone who prays the sinner's prayer is actually saved

And that's why we should cautiously rejoice over professed decisions made for Christ while immediately beginning the process of discipleship with the individual and watching to see if the person actually begins to demonstrate some fruit of repentance

You know, some of the most difficult people to lead to the Lord are those who appear to have their lives together

Jesus taught that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven

And that's because people of Jesus' day considered wealth to be a sure sign of God's pleasure with someone

So a wealthy person would see no need of repentance and would instead rely on the evidence of having received God's blessing

The prevalent view today is that heaven is merit-based and that the person who does more good than bad – or at least more good than the other fellow – or better yet, the person who can justify their actions in some way to make them appear good – will get into heaven

So people who are considered to be "good" people by today's standard are very difficult to witness to because they don't sense a need for a Savior

The self-righteous see no reason for repentance

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

The "tax collectors and prostitutes" of the world may initially live their lives believing that they won't have anything to do with God because they can't believe God wants anything to do with them

They are conscious that their lives don't square with God's demands so when the gospel is made clear to them they quite often jump at the chance to be saved

I find it somewhat ironic that the worst sins of the vilest sinner won't keep them out of the kingdom if they truly repent and obey the Lord but the perceived goodness of the self-righteous will keep them from taking that same step

So we need to use this parable and other passages in the way Jesus did to attempt to show those "good" people who are all around us that they too need the Savior

That all their relative goodness and lip-service to all the right things won't be enough to save them in the end if they continue to deny God their true allegiance and obedience

The second application we find from the parable has to do with **service** once a person is in the kingdom

As we saw last week we have unfortunately created a culture of "easy-believism" by downplaying the necessity of accepting Jesus as Lord as well as Savior

We have sold people on the idea that accepting certain truths and repeating certain words guarantees they don't need to ever worry about their spiritual state again

And by neglecting to emphasize the necessity of being willing to submit their lives to God and to obey what they see from God's Word we have created a generation of people who treat God's Word like a buffet where they can choose to obey only what they wish

But our parable shows us that obedience is essential in the kingdom of heaven

I am indebted to missionary and author **Dr. Wesley L. Duewel** [[Duewel.jpg](#)] for the following keys to obedience

He writes that:

1. Obedience is key to **cleansing and holiness** and that there is no other way to maintain a holy life except to constantly walk in God's light (**1John 1:7**)

2. Obedience is key to **communion and fellowship with God** and disobedience quickly destroys fellowship – again, **1John 1:7**

3. Obedience is key to **spiritual understanding** and how if we would know God's truth we must choose to do God's will **John 7:17**

4. **Obedience is key to confidence in prayer** – look with me at **1John 3:21-22** – *Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*

How many prayers do you suppose are denied because the praying person is not living in full obedience to what they know of God's light?

5. Obedience is key to **blessing** – **James 1:22-25** – *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, **he will be blessed in his doing.***

6. Obedience is key to **kingdom advance** God, for whatever reason, has chosen to advance his kingdom through the combination of the power of the Holy Spirit and the obedience of his people and both are indispensable - we see this in the Great Commandment of **Matthew 28:19-20** but also in **Mark 16:15** where Jesus tells his disciples – *“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”*

Not legalism or merit-based salvation

There are those who might protest that we shouldn't put such an emphasis on “doing” and “obedience” for fear of having people think we are lapsing into legalism or preaching some form of merit-based gospel

But obedience to God's will is an inseparable part of salvation

Look at what Jesus said in **John 15:14** – *“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”*

And look at **1John 2:3-5** – *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected”*

Then look with me really quickly at **Titus 3:8** where, after describing God's mercy and grace in saving us in spite of our depravity and wickedness, Paul writes – *The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.*

Obedience and doing good works don't earn us salvation but they are a necessary part of salvation which we are commanded to perform

Conclusion

The world is full of big talkers and so is the church

But, at the end of the day, what you do is far more important in God's kingdom than what you say

There is a popular old expression among pastors and parents that goes – **Delayed obedience is disobedience**

As parents, we desire and expect immediate obedience from our children and God as our heavenly Father is no different

And while the point of Jesus' parable is that the son who first refused to do what his father commanded, in the end, did his will we can see that neither son did their father's will in the best way possible

Both disobeyed to some degree but only one persisted in his disobedience

I believe Jesus told this parable not to say that the die was cast and the fate of those religious leaders was sealed but to give them an opportunity to repent and turn to obedience like the first son had

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is nudging you this morning about some area where you know you have been delaying obedience

As we prepare here in just a few moments to partake of the Lord's Table now is a prime time to do business with God and commit to doing whatever it is you know he is calling you to do

God's world is filled with examples of his will that apply to all believers but God also has a specific will for each individual that falls under the umbrella of his general will for all believers

While we may need to pray and ask God to reveal his specific, personal will we are each responsible for the light that we have been given and we need to obey **quickly, gladly, and faithfully**

Because, as **John Stott [Stott.jpg]** has put it, *"Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured in terms of obedience."*

And that quote sums up the parable of the two sons pretty well don't you think?

As the worship team comes to lead us in our closing hymn which is **#571-Trust and Obey** I want to encourage you to really pay attention to the words you're singing as you prepare your hearts for partaking of the elements of the Lord's Table

Those who are serving should make their way to the front of the church as we sing

Let's pray