

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 27, 2026 jj
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Jesus told the parable of a father talking to his sons. He said to the two of them, Go and do your work. To our ears that means God our heavenly Father orders us in His Law, Go and follow my commandments. Go, believe in me, which are commandments one through three, and Go, love your neighbor, four through ten. There's more detail about that in your catechism.

Everybody receives this Father's command because everybody is created in the image of God and our Lord never wanted anyone to be lost but for all to believe the Gospel, and be saved. It doesn't matter whether you were part of the Jewish nation, the natural children of Abraham, or even if you've been a member of the Lutheran church since birth, or whether you have just heard His Word for the first time today. The Father simply says to everyone, Go. The different responses of the sons tell us a lot about what is on our hearts and minds and how we approach our God and His holy command.

That first son really annoys us, doesn't he? This disrespectful child immediately says, "I will not do what you say!" Very defiant, very difficult to deal with. It's easy to see this son's attitude at home or in school or at work or on the highway and hey, we're trying to drive here! Our wrath rises along with the hair on the back of our necks against those who are like this first son. What a disobedient, spoiled child, to refuse God's holy Word like that! How shameful. Surely, he needs to be punished by parents, given detention in school, fired by the boss, or sent to jail by the police. Yeah, he goes back and does the work after all, but how can you depend on hypocrisy like that?

The second son says, "I go, sir." Oh, now there's a response that will make a parent proud, a teacher thankful, a boss pleased, and a nation grateful. We have here a law-abiding citizen and member of the church promising to be obedient. Just take a look at those two sons. One is a disgrace while the other is an up-standing example to us all.

But then you consider the second son a little more closely, the one whose mouth merely speaks obedience. The father calls him and says, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." The second son replies, "I go, sir," but did not go. Who might this son be like?... Think of the little child who says "I'll get ready, Mom", the friend or family member or coworker who made a commitment to you, and then dropped the ball, some emergency came up or they outright refused to come through for you. Maybe you did that to someone else. Pastors, US Presidents, farmers, doctors and delivery drivers have all done this, said they'd do it and they didn't. That's not so good after all. Actions need to follow our words, and we have all failed.

But you know what? There is a third son! Yes, there were two in the story, but the third Son is the One Who is telling the story, the One speaking the Word, that is Jesus, of course. He's the third Son, who is at the same time similar to and vastly different from each of the first two sons. From eternity the Father said to Him, "Son, go and work in My vineyard today." Christ the Son of God said obediently, "I will go," and He went and did exactly, completely and perfectly what His Father wanted Him to do!

Our Epistle from Philippians sings of the Savior who said He would go, and He went and came through on His promise.

Jesus, the Son of God kept His own holy Law for the world and for you. He atoned, that is, paid for all the sins of the world and that includes all of your sins. He poured Himself out for the life of the world and for you, even as he cried out to the world and to His Father Who sent Him, "It is finished" (John 19:30) and to the One Who said to Him, "Go", Jesus said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit" (Luke 23:46). On the cross He defeated this world's deceiver for you. He humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. And the Father glorified Him when He rose from the dead. Actions perfectly followed promises, and He has saved all humanity.

Because He had said it would be so, the Counselor has come, that is, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, to inspire the apostles and evangelists to write down the very Word of God, and to work repentance in every believer. The Spirit causes the inscription of the Words of Jesus, the Son of God, in the Bible and in your heart. What do these Words of Jesus do in your Christian life? Well, something like this ...

‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he repented and went." Yes, just like that first son, that terrible, rotten sinner whom we thought was no good. That person couldn’t possibly be a good enough Christian. He is told to come into the vineyard to work and he replies that he will not. But then, afterward, he repented and went into the vineyard. What an amazing transformation! It’s an about-face. Even

though he said he would not, he had a change of mind, which is what the word repentance in the Bible actually means.

Maybe that has happened to you, or one you know, one you thought could never change, that the mess they made with their life could never turn around. Everyone may have given up, but as you found out, God did not give up; He turned their heart in repentance in order to reconcile with God and with other people, perhaps also reconcile with you. It may have taken a night or two of terror once the horrible effects of the wayward sinful life had ultimately caught up with them. Whatever God used to bring you or the one you’re thinking of to their knees, He was immediately there to feed the hungry soul and stick that hand out to rescue the one who, like sinking Peter, finally said, “Lord, save me!” And He did! Yes, it is true: the one who was like the first son did commit a sin by saying No, but following the repentance and forgiveness, the Lord Himself led them to be forgiven and restored to the family, eager and equipped to do the Father’s will once he had been set free.

The third Son, Jesus, finished telling His parable and then asks the religious experts a question concerning the other two sons, namely, the first son who said he wouldn’t go and then repented; and the second son who said he would go but didn’t. Surely there is but one answer and it is an easy answer. "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." What other answer could there be? Certainly no other, for Jesus constructed and told the parable in such a way that the answer was clear for everyone who heard His Word that day and this day. The first was the correct answer. And Jesus then said to the exposed hypocrites, ‘Truly, I say to you, the tax

collectors and the prostitutes go into the Kingdom of God before you. 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 repent and believe him."

And why is this so? Because, even though those most notorious breakers of God's Law are by nature sinful and unclean and have sinned against God in thought, word and deed, they have also received the gift of repentance and they look to Christ for forgiveness. Surely, this is why John came, to call people to repentance and this is why Christ came, to call and welcome them into His Kingdom, doing so gladly and with great joy. Their sin, however bad it was, is totally gone, it doesn't matter anymore, and they have been made pure and holy in God's sight, just like you.

For those who say they'll follow God's commandments, who claim that they have not sinned against Him at all, the Law has not yet completed its work on these seemingly upstanding people, so they will hear no Gospel. They are not to the point where they admit that they have not kept the Law. Though they may be truly exemplary in the eyes of the world, Jesus says that without repentance, when they say No to confessing their sin, they are not in the Kingdom of God. They are not yet thirsty for His Living Water.

Still, it is most certainly true that the Lord wants the Good News to be proclaimed to them and they enter the Kingdom of God. For Christ truly wants all, including the hypocritical and stubbornly unrepentant, to hear the words that, after the Law has fully convicted them, these words promise to

bring them eternal life and salvation. These words were the promise that the third Son made long ago and came through on it with the actions of His death and resurrection, all of which He has done for you. What are the words that will do all of this for you? They are the words of the Gospel, of course. But what words specifically? Well, you who are in the Kingdom of God know them well and you have heard them in the Absolution, namely, "Dearly beloved, believe this as absolutely certain: you are forgiven

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.