

Sermon For Sunday September 27 2026

Matthew 21:23-32 - Pentecost 18

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew takes place during Holy Week. It was after the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode on a donkey and signaled with powerful symbolic action his arrival as the Messiah. It was also after his cleansing of the temple, driving out the money-changers. And while there he also healed some who were blind and lame. By word and deed Jesus was exerting his authority, his rightful authority, as the Son of Man and the Son of God come to His holy city.

Oh, and those of human authority didn't like it too much. The scribes and pharisees tried to trick him, trip him up in his words. Instead they showed themselves to be the fools. Outfoxed by the creator of foxes and pharisees. Jesus has authority to do these things and much more. He even has authority to lay down his life and take it up again, as he soon would. He has authority to forgive sins, and delegates that to his church and her pastors. But he doesn't answer to human blowhards and pompous men who think themselves something when they are nothing. He will not be fooled.

But Jesus still doesn't write them off entirely. He tells them a parable, which, had they ears to hear, would have set them in the right direction: The owner of a vineyard has two sons, and tells them both to go work in the vineyard. The first son says he won't, but changes his mind and goes. The second son says he will go, but never does. Now which of the two did the will of his Father?

The question behind the question isn't about the 2 sons, it's about what it means to be a son in the vineyard. It's about what it means for you to do the will of God, and to be a child of God. It's a comparison between people who think they have their act together, like the pharisees and scribes, and those who change their minds and actually do God's will.

The pharisees were all talk. If you'd ask them how well they keep God's law, they'd likely tell you about all their good works. They'd tell you how they carefully keep the law and live a holy life. They give what the law requires, do what the law demands, learn it, know it, and follow it. Their self-assured piety and arrogant self-righteousness would hardly know any bounds. And

they certainly would have given themselves good marks compared with the tax collectors and prostitutes.

But for all the appearance of goodness and holiness, that's not what was in their hearts. And that's not how God saw them. And that's not what they looked like compared with the perfect standard of his law.

You can see where we're going, can't you? What good church going member of Zion Lutheran wouldn't also tell you all about their credentials? I go to church, I volunteer, I give what I can. I try to be nice to people. I'm not perfect, but I'm better than those sinners and criminals. I don't treat my family poorly. I pay my bills. I'm a good citizen. And while all those things are nice and fine, they amount to little more than talk, talk. For that perfect standard of God's law leaves us nowhere to hide our sins. The darkness of our hearts isn't dark enough to disguise the evil that lurks within, and often peaks out into our lives. We may do a pretty good job of keeping up appearances, but what sinner doesn't say one thing and do another - when it comes to our own righteousness.

Jesus compares the two sons, and what do we see? the one who says the right thing - who appears to be together - who tells his Father what he wants to hear - but then does his own thing. But then there's that other who says he won't but later changes his mind and does his father's will. Changes his mind. In other words, repents.

That's what repent means - to turn around, do an about face, to change one's mind, indeed, one's whole orientation. It's not about doing penance, or making up for your wrongs. It's a change of attitude or spirit - a turning away from sin and toward Christ in faith. A turning from death to life. A turning from falsehood to truth, from self-righteousness to God-given righteousness.

This is why the tax collectors and prostitutes are better off. Not because of their sin, but because of their repentance. The pharisees had no repentance. John the Baptist made it plain to them - Repent! Still, they didn't think they had sins to repent for. But many big-time sinners who came to faith in Jesus did. They came crawling and crying in humble faith, to the only one who could and would forgive their grievous sins.

So which son did the Father's will? The first. That they got right. But which kind of son will you be?

The one that is talk, talk? The one that claims a righteousness of your own? The one that says, "I keep the commandments" and lives such a lie?

Or will you be honest that you haven't, that you don't, that you can't do God's will? Will you admit your sins, your wicked thoughts and words and deeds, and bring them to where they belong? To the cross of Jesus Christ? Repent. Change your mind. Let go, turn away from those sins, and turn in faith toward Christ who is our only righteousness.

And he will, and he does forgive you! This is his will. This is God's will. That sinners repent and believe in Christ. You want to do the will of God? It's not about the illusion that you can keep his commands. It's about the repentance and faith that comes as a gift from God himself - that he changes us, changes our minds and hearts and spirits - from utterly lost sinners to dearly beloved children. From dead men walking to eternally living.

Oh, and one other thing. Jesus still shares a table with repentant sinners. Come receive his gifts today, child of God, here at his altar. Amen.