

Parable of the Two Sons

(Matthew 21:28-32)

In Jesus' parables, it can sometimes be hard to determine which character we're supposed to identify with. Perhaps in this parable, though, we are called to identify with both sons, recognizing how we can exhibit qualities they each display.

Sometimes we deny what we know God wants us to do. We rebel against doing the work, through adult versions of tantrums. *It's too hard! I want to do this other thing instead!* Our selfish desires get in the way of accepting God's authority in our lives. But then, we reconsider. We recognize God's overwhelming love for us, how God always knows what is best in any situation. We change our minds and do what we know God wants us to do.

Other times we are like the second son. We say yes with a smile to the tasks God asks of us, but we make no real effort to accomplish these tasks. Maybe it's to appease our own conscience or to give the

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appearance of faithful obedience. It's so much easier to just say yes and then forget about it, isn't it? We give lip service to God.

When Jesus asks the Temple authorities which son did the will of the father, they knew the answer: The first son is the more faithful. Jesus points out that they are more like the second son, while the sinners they revile are more like the first. When faced with the work of the kingdom, we have choices. Which son will we emulate? Or better yet, let us agree like the second son and work like the first.

The words, "what do you think?" in verse 28 tie this parable to the Jewish leaders who had just confronted Christ and tried to discredit him. The Lord wants to convey a critical message to them, a message that would determine their eternal destiny.

What does it take to enter God's kingdom? Not only profession and righteousness, but also repentance and belief.

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The parable of the two sons is simple and clear. It concerns a man who has two sons. Let me make note of several facts. (1) The command “go and work” is an emphatic imperative. The father meant what he said: “You go!” “You work!” There is no other choice in the father’s mind; no other alternative. The sons were to work and serve their father.

(2) Note the word “today.” Today is the day to go. Today is the day to work, not tomorrow. Tomorrow may be too late. The harvest will rot in the field. The night will come when no man can work. The sons could also die. They had to go today while they had a chance to help their father.

(3) The first said, “I will not.” This was disrespectful rebellion. It was the refusal of a son who wished to go his own way in life, who rebelled at being told what to do. He was selfish, worldly, carnal, fleshly, materialistic, and prideful. He would have his own

way and do his own thing regardless. However,
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that the first son later changed his mind and went.

The word change means to repent, to turn. The first son changed and turned from his self-chosen life of rebellion and worldliness—turned back to his father and went into the father’s vineyard to work. He did exactly what his father commanded him to do.

(4) The second son said, “I will, sir.” His response indicates that he will go immediately and serve zealously in the father’s work. He said I go to work for you. But he failed: he never did go to work for his father. He went to work, but not for his father. He was just like the first son: selfish, disregarding the father and his needs. He went about his own life, living and working for himself. The only difference between the two sons is that the second son professed respect for the father and professed to work for the father, but he never went into the father’s vineyard. He never did the father’s work.

(This implies that what he did day-by- day was his own work, his own labor. He worked and lived as he wished, disregarding the father entirely. It

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was a life of religion and moral stiffness as we shall see).

(5) Christ asked the religionists standing around which of the two sons did the father's will. The religionists did not see the point of the parable yet, so they gave the obvious answer: the first son did the father's will.

Their immediate response to Christ is interesting. They demonstrated just how much religion and self-righteousness can blind a person, giving a sense of false security. A person, clergyman and layman alike, who sincerely lives a life of religion and moral purity has great difficulty understanding why he is not acceptable to God and cannot enter God's kingdom.

Then, Jesus gave the point of the parable. Sinners enter the kingdom before religionists (the self-righteous and professors only.) Note what Jesus did. (1) Jesus identified the man and the two sons in the parable. The man who owned the vineyard was God.

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God is the Person who possess the kingdom. The first son represents the non-religious and worldly of this earth. These do not profess religion and they do not know they are lost. They desire to go their own way, wanting nothing to do with God. The tax collectors represented the rejected and worldly-minded, those more interested in money and in the things of this world than in God. The prostitutes represented the immoral and sensual, those more interested in pleasure than God.

The second son represents the religious of this earth (the self-righteous and those who make a false profession). These were either reared in church from earliest childhood or else came into the church

sometime in later life. They professed religion and righteousness to be the way a person should live.

(2) Jesus identified the vineyard and work that was to be done. The vineyard is the Kingdom of God and the work is “entering the Kingdom of God”—serve God

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with his kingdom. Both sons (all people) receive the same command and obligation: “Go into the vineyard.” God respects both sons. He does not force either son to work, neither the son who rebels nor the son who makes a commitment but fails to work in God’s vineyard. The sons’ wills are honored. They may go and work whenever they wish.

(3) Jesus clearly stress the point of the parable. He said emphatically, “I tell you the truth.” The word “I” means the Messiah, the Son of God Himself. The Messiah is revealing a critical truth. He said in unmistakable terms: sinners “are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,” before the self-

righteous and the false religionist and false professor. It is important to pay close attention to the Lord's words. He said "ahead of you." He was not shutting the door of heaven to the religionists. They just could not enter as they presently were. As Christ said in the next verse, they lacked one thing, and they must do that thing in order to enter God's kingdom.

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(4) Jesus shocked his audience. He declared that man's idea of religion is wrong. Religion and righteousness are not enough to enter God's kingdom. It takes more. Religion is not enough (worship services, ceremony, ritual, profession, and ordinance). Righteousness is not enough (morality, virtue, law, rules and regulations, good works, and commitment). Christ shockingly declared to the religionist and to the righteous "Sinners are entering the kingdom ahead of you, What you have is not enough; it takes more. Something else is needed."

The reason sinners enter God's kingdom and religionists do not is clearly stated: religionists do not believe John's message that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Note that Jesus says **three** things. (1) John was righteous. John came "to show you the way of righteousness," the very righteousness that religionists say is necessary to live for God. John was godly and lived just like the religionists said he should live, yet religionists did not believe John; that is, they

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did not believe his ministry and witness—that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. (2) Sinners believed John's witness: "The tax collectors and prostitutes believed him." The first son did exactly what John said to do: he repented of his loose life and believed that Jesus was the Son of God. (3) Religionists saw the evidence, but they rejected it. They saw the evidence of John's righteousness and of the changed lives of sinners ("even after you saw this"). But the religionists still denied the facts.

So, what are the lessons we can learn from this Scripture reading from Matthew.

One of the key lessons is obedience over words. The first son initially refuses to work in the vineyard but later repents and obeys, highlighting that actions speak louder than promises. A second lesson is repentance is a key, as demonstrated by the first son.

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It emphasizes that it's never too late to turn back to God. The religious leaders of the time serve as a reminder that mere belief is insufficient without corresponding actions.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for reminding us of the importance of obedience and action. Help us to be like the first son who, though initially resistant, ultimately obeyed his father's command to work in the vineyard. Give us the strength and willingness to do the work you have called us to do, even when it may be difficult or uncomfortable. May our actions reflect our faith and bring glory to your name. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior Jesus Christ. **Amen.**