

SERIES: Parables from the Master Story-Teller

SERMON: **Doing the Will of God: Parable of the Two Sons**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 21:28-32

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We come today in our series on *Parables from the Master Story-Teller* to a story Jesus told about two sons. His most famous parable, about the Prodigal Son and his Elder Brother, was also about two sons, but this one is perhaps His least known. The former was his longest parable; this one may be His shortest. But the story I want us to examine today from Matthew 21 also has some striking similarities to the longer and more famous parable. Both brothers in each of these stories have major flaws. In addition, in both stories the brother who starts off well ends up poorly and vice versa. And in both stories Jesus' purpose is to send a strong message to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law that God's evaluation of our status with Him can be quite different from our own.

Please turn with me to Matthew 21:28-32. (By the way, the order of this story is different in NASB from the NIV or the KJV, but the essential content is the same). Jesus starts this parable by asking His listeners to put on their thinking caps.

*"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'* (The vineyard stands for the Kingdom of God).

*"I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.*

*"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.*

*"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"*

*"The first," they answered.*

*Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.*

### **The background and context of the parable of the two sons.**

It was Holy Week. On Palm Sunday Jesus made His Triumphal Entry into the city of Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple of the merchandisers and money changers, That night He went to Bethany to spend the night at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. For the next few days Jesus would get up early, go back to the city and enter the temple courts, referring to the Court of the Gentiles, the one place in the Temple where non-Jews and women could gather to hear Him teach.

According to the paragraph immediately preceding the parable, the religious muckety-mucks of the day, the chief priests and the elders, approach Him while He is speaking there in the Temple. These would probably include a wide variety of religious leaders, including Pharisees,

Sadducees, Herodians, and even some Zealots and Essenes. Though these groups were usually fighting among themselves, they had found common ground in opposing Jesus, because they believed that He threatened the authority of the entire religious establishment.

They angrily challenge Jesus about his teaching, his healings, and especially His utterly presumptuous action in closing down the stock exchange they had set up in the Temple. While that was happening, they seemed powerless to stop Him, but now that they had recovered from the initial shock and awe, they demand an explanation. Thus their two questions: “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”

Jesus replies with one question of His own. Look at verse 24:

*Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?"*

*They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."*

*So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."*

*Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."*

Usually we find the Pharisees and religious leaders trying to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma; this time He returns the favor. The reason they are boxed in is not simply that they had rejected John's baptism; they had also rejected John's clear testimony about Jesus, whom John had openly proclaimed to be “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and the very “Son of God” (John 1:29, 34). To accept John as a prophet from heaven would require accepting Jesus as the Messiah; and that they simply would not do. But they can't openly reject John as a prophet either for political reasons. So they claim agnosticism; they don't know the answer to His question. Therefore, Jesus refuses to answer their questions. Instead He tells them a story, a very simple story that almost anyone in that day could relate to.

### **The parable itself**

Presbyterian pastor Earl Palmer paints a picturesque scene of a farm family sitting down to breakfast. The father is planning out his day and turns to one of his sons and says, “Son, I would like for you to go and work in the south forty today.” The boy responds, “I will *not*.” We aren't told how the father reacts, but he can't be too happy. Perhaps the veins stand out in his neck and he gets red in the face because of the blatant disrespect his son shows for his authority, but apparently he chooses not to escalate the confrontation. The father has made his will known and the son has expressed his defiance; he will let it go for now.

Then the father turns to his other son and says, “Will *you* go and work in the south forty?” and the son responds, “I will, sir!” He not only agrees, but he goes out of his way to show respect. And I suspect, knowing the rest of the story, that he may even have added, “I will be happy to work in your vineyard, father. I'm not like some other members of this family who like to

freeload. When I was having my devotions this morning I was praying that God would give me an opportunity to show my gratitude for all you have provided. Dad, you've made my day! When can I get started?"<sup>1</sup>

Do any of you parents relate to this story so far? I have two sons. One was a world-class compliant child the whole time he was growing up. He was never defiant, always easy to manage, always agreeable, a delight to travel with, a delight at the breakfast table. And, of course, I thought *I* was a world-class parent.

But then we had another son who was, well, different, right from the starting gate. He and his mother are in Minneapolis today or I probably wouldn't be telling you this. But it is also true that I wouldn't be sharing it if things hadn't changed a lot so that my second son has become a fine young man in whom I take great delight. But if the truth be told, I heard a lot of "I will not's" from that boy as he was growing up. I relate very well to this scene at the breakfast table.

Now what we have in this story is one boy who is a pain at breakfast and another who is a joy at breakfast. But the problem for this second boy (in Palmer's words) is that this is not a breakfast parable; it is a supper parable. And the picture that is painted at the supper table is very different. The boy who said "I will not", we are told, later changed his mind and went. The Greek word for "changed his mind" is the word often translated "repent." He thought about what he had said, he realized he was wrong, and he went out to the vineyard to work.

The other boy had a change of heart as well. Despite his eager and respectful response to this father, "I will, sir," he did not go. He got busy. Or some friends called and asked him to go to a party. Or once his brother left the table he realized he couldn't get anymore mileage by comparing his own behavior with that of his brother. We're not told why; we are simply told he did not do what he said he would do.

Please recognize that both of these boys are flawed. The one is defiant; the other disobedient. Neither is a paragon of virtue, nor is Jesus presenting either as an example of how people ought to respond to the heavenly Father. What the Father desires is for His children to say, "I will," and then do it. But the fact is the responses of these two are very common. And more importantly, though both are flawed, they are not equivalent. And this is demonstrated as Jesus asks the chief priests and the teachers of the Law . . .

### **A very specific question based upon the parable**

"Which of the two *did* what his father wanted?" Maybe they don't realize they are being set up, but they respond, "the first." And Jesus confirms their answer, but in a way I doubt they appreciate. He says, in effect, "You're right, and I tell you the truth, the most heinous sinners you can imagine are entering the Kingdom instead of you, because though they messed up big time at first, they repented and believed. And you proud religious types did not."

Let's think about Jesus' answer in some detail. First, He says that tax collectors and prostitutes

are entering the kingdom of God. Why does He pick these two classes of people? Because to the Pharisees they represented the worst of the worst, the very scum of society. The tax collectors were traitors who worked for Rome. They had a very lucrative business because Rome specified the minimum tax they must collect but not the maximum. So long as the tax collectors gave Rome what it wanted, it didn't matter how much more they collected, and they could pocket the difference.

Prostitutes were poor and vulnerable; they had no one, not even the Roman government, protecting them, so it was safe to abuse them as paradigms of evil (and sadly, many of the same religious leaders who abused them verbally also used them on the side).

I wonder what terms Jesus might use if he were speaking to us today. He might speak of "potheads" or "gays and lesbians" or "porn addicts"—the kind of people who are held in very low esteem by many religious types today. What Jesus is trying to do is to shock the religious elite into realizing that some people who are very low on the moral pecking order have recognized and admitted their desperate condition, have repented, and have turned in faith to Jesus. And they have been gloriously saved.

Jesus says that those who know they are sinners-saved-by-grace are nearer the Kingdom of God than even the cream of the crop of conservative, judgmental, legalistic, self-righteous religious leaders. Why? "For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did." At first the religious leaders were quite intrigued by John the Baptist and went out of their way to hear him—I suppose something like the Hollywood elites and the politically powerful who always flock to Billy Graham's crusades. In John 5:35 Jesus says to these same leaders, "John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light." They were curious and wanted to be seen around this strange country preacher.

But light always produces heat, and the heat became uncomfortable, and soon they walked away. John was not politically correct, nor was he culturally sensitive; he talked too much about sin and hellfire. Jesus states in Matthew 21:32 that even after the religious big-shots saw the tax collectors and prostitutes repenting, and the drunks getting sober, and the soldiers stop swearing, and the womanizers becoming faithful husbands, they still refused to follow suit; after all, what did *they* have to repent of?

Chuck Colson was a hatchet man for the Nixon White House and was hated by his political enemies. (If you think Bush and Cheney and are hated today, you have a short memory). The difference was that Colson really was a crook. Eventually he was convicted of high crimes and misdemeanors and sent to prison. But then God invaded his life and he surrendered to Jesus Christ. At first his political enemies scoffed at the thought of Colson getting religion. But he hadn't gotten religion; he had received Jesus Christ, and there's a world of difference between those two things. For the past thirty years he has been living for Christ, writing theology, serving as President of Prison Fellowship, and being a prophet to our culture. His enemies don't scoff at him anymore, but neither have they followed him in repentance. I fully

expect Colson will enter God's eternal kingdom instead of them.

### **The application of the parable**

What are the chief lessons we should take home from this story? I would like to mention three.

**1. Obedience is never judged by what we say but by what we do.** This is a common theme of Scripture. Words are slippery things. Words are cheap. Anyone can utter them. But deeds are costly. You are well familiar with James 2:14ff: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" The expected answer to this rhetorical question is clearly "No," for James goes on to say that "faith by itself, if it not accompanied by action, is dead."

Interestingly James even uses a prostitute as a positive illustration of his point. "Was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" Rahab was a pagan harlot in Jericho who was confronted with the claims of the one true God when two Jewish spies asked for sanctuary in her home. She welcomed them, believed in their God, and demonstrated her faith through hiding them until they could escape. Rahab could have talked a good line, but if she had not hidden them on her roof under stalks of flax, her words would have been worthless.

In Matthew 7:24, 26 Jesus shares a familiar story about the wise and foolish builders. "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. . . . But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand." True faith is proved by obedience not by hearing and not by professing.

### **2. One's initial response to God or to the Gospel is not always final.**

**This is a glorious truth for some.** I suspect if we all had time to share our faith stories here this morning, we would hear quite a few from individuals who resisted the Gospel the first time they heard it; perhaps even the first 100 times! I never cease to be amazed at the patience and long-suffering nature of God in that He will pursue a person again and again, for months and even years.

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of sharing with our Sunday at Six group an amazing story that is very personal to me. There were five children in my family, my dad was a pastor and a Christian educator, and four of his five children entered the ministry and are still in ministry. However I have a little sister named Mary who walked away from the Lord when she was about 15. She demonstrated her rebellion by smoking, dated unbelievers, married one of them, and for over forty years showed little interest in spiritual things or church or the faith of her family.

About nine months ago Mary and her husband Rob moved from Atlanta to Memphis. One day she asked my dad, who is 89 what she could do for him. He responded, "I wish you would find a

church in Memphis and begin to attend.” They noticed a church near their home called Collierville Bible Church so they went one day. They liked the pastor and I emailed him and asked him to be on the lookout for my sister and brother-in-law should they come back. He said he would and they did, and the pastor made a connection. They began to ask lots of questions, so my parents sent them things to read and they asked more questions.

About three months ago Mary and Rob asked my older brother, who is a Free Church pastor in Iowa, to meet them between their home and his and he spent many hours responding to spiritual questions and sharing the Gospel with them. On Easter Sunday, just a little over two months ago, Rob professed faith in Christ and my sister returned to the faith of her childhood. The result has been nothing short of amazing. They are attending church every Sunday, they are involved in a Bible study, they are reading solid theology books, and almost every Sunday they are inviting new church friends over for dinner.

Rob asked if he could share his testimony in front of the whole church, which is amazing because Rob is very quiet. Three weeks ago my brother went to Memphis and baptized him in the Collierville Bible Church. My parents, who prayed for Mary virtually for over 40 years, and for Rob for over 35 years, now feel like the old prophet Simeon in Luke 2, who after holding the baby Jesus in the Temple praised God saying, “Now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation.” In less than two weeks we will be attending our first family reunion where there will be true spiritual unity in the Andrus family.

What is even more amazing is that God sometimes accepts sinners even on their deathbed, though they have wasted every opportunity He has given them over their entire lifetime. Even though He can get nothing out of them, He still accepts them when they sincerely repent and turn in faith to Jesus. The thief on the Cross, of course, is the paradigm example. He had only a few hours to serve Christ from the time he repented until he entered eternity, and there’s not much service you can do with your hands and feet nailed to a cross, but Jesus told him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Praise God that one’s initial response to the Gospel is not always final.

**This is a tragic truth for others.** There are some who accept the Gospel glibly, profess faith in Christ, eagerly join a church, and begin to serve with great enthusiasm. I have known many who started out in such a promising fashion who are nowhere to be found today. The author of Hebrews describes some of these people as “those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age.” But then he makes this tragic observation about these same people: “It is impossible for them, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance.” Why? “Because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

What is he saying? Did they lose their salvation or were they phonies from the start? I think he is purposely ambiguous and vague. What is clear is that if they lose it they can’t get it back. Many of these are guilty, I fear, of the Judas syndrome. Judas was a well-respected member of the

Twelve Apostles, so respected that they entrusted their limited funds to his oversight. He preached, he healed the sick, he cast out demons. And on the last night of Jesus' earthly life, when the Twelve were warned that one of them was a traitor, none of them said, "I'll bet I know who it is—that Judas has been acting pretty suspicious lately." Instead they each suspected himself before suspecting Judas. "Is it I?" they asked Jesus, "Is it I?" Was Judas ever saved? I don't think so. But did he convince others that he was? Certainly. And did he convince himself? Perhaps.

My purpose here is not to generate paranoia and fear in the true believer but to call for honest self-examination. If you have said "Yes" to Jesus, are you living out that commitment? Is it real? Can your friends and neighbors and fellow-workers see it? Has it made any difference?

**3. Where we end up is a lot more important than where we start.** Friends, the qualifications for the Kingdom have *nothing* to do with one's past and *everything* to do with one's present and future. I don't say to you that your past is unimportant. We saw for sure in the life of David that the natural consequences of sin are severe and sometimes permanent.

But your history is not determinative of your future. Where you are spiritually today is more important than where you have been. I think much confusion has come to the church through too strong an emphasis on the time of conversion, the notion that my eternal destiny rests completely on a decision I made at a point in the past. When people are asked, "How do you know you're saved and going to heaven?" too often they respond, "Because I asked Jesus into my heart when I was 5," or "Because I walked forward in a Billy Graham Crusade when I was 24," or "because I was baptized when I was 12."

Those aren't necessarily heretical answers, but I'll tell you a far better one: "I know I'm saved because I am right now trusting Jesus and His death on the cross as the full payment for my sins. I acknowledge that I am more flawed and sinful than I ever dared believe, but I also realize now that I am even more loved and accepted than I ever dared to hope. I know I have nothing in my record to merit God's approval, but I am right now resting in what Jesus did for me." Some who have walked an aisle or raised a hand or made a profession have not gone one step beyond that. They may be leaning on a broken reed—trusting in some decision or some past action of theirs rather than in what Jesus did for them.

### **The epilogue to the parable**

Right after the parable of the two sons Jesus tells another story—the parable of the tenants, which reinforces many of the same truths as this one, and then we read at the end of the chapter (verse 45, 46), "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them." They knew He was pointing at them as the son who gladly told the father he would work in the field but then did not go. But did this knowledge produce any repentance, any faith? No. Instead it says, "They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet." As a matter of fact, in two short days they figured out how to arrest him, and by Friday they had killed the Lord of glory.

**Conclusion:** What do you do with a Savior who admits dirty, rotten, gross sinners into His Heaven but rejects upstanding, influential religious leaders with impeccable credentials? You marvel and you stand in awe (at least if you recognize that you are one of the former). You say with Paul, a one-time Pharisee, :

*“How thankful I am to Christ Jesus our Lord for considering me trustworthy and appointing me to serve him, even though I used to scoff at the name of Christ. I hunted down his people, harming them in every way I could. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how kind and gracious the Lord was! . . .*

*This is a true saying, and everyone should believe it: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me, so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. Glory and honor to God forever and ever. He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.” (The Message)*

At the breakfast table Paul said to God, “I will not,” but later at the supper table he and the Father had wonderful fellowship. What about you?

As we close this morning I want you to remember these two truths:

Religious claims and credentials do not qualify a person to enter the kingdom, and even gross sin, when repented of, will not keep a person out!

It is better to believe what at first you cannot say than to say at first what you do not believe.

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i. Earl Palmer, sermon at Beeson Pastors School 2004, [tapes@soundword.com](mailto:tapes@soundword.com).