

Are You Doing the Father's Will?

As seen in many examples from Jesus, He often responded to questions from His disciples by teaching them a parable. He taught the *Parable of the Unmerciful Servant* in Matthew 18:21-35 in reply to a question about forgiveness. In reply to the question about what disciples would receive who had given up all in order to follow Jesus He taught the *Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard* in Matthew 20:1-16.

The *Parable of the Two Sons* is one of a group of parables all with the same theme. These are found in Matthew 21:28-22:14. Jesus also used parables in replying to some of the challenges by those who opposed Him. During His final week in Jerusalem, He was challenged by religious leaders in Matthew 21:23-27. In response, He told three parables: The *Parable of the Two Sons* in Matthew 21:28-32; the *Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers* in Matthew 21:33-46; and the *Parable of the Wedding Feast* in Matthew 22:1-14. Each of these three is seemingly aimed at the leaders of the Israelites. This evening our focus will be on the *Parable of the Two Sons*. We will begin with a reading of the parable itself, and this comes from Matthew 21:28-32 [RSV]. So please feel free to open up your Bibles and follow along.

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 repented and went. 30. And he went to the second 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 harlots 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 harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him."

Carey and I have three young sons of our own and we would like to have a nickel for every time the modern day version of today's parable from Matthew has taken place in our house! And because that happens, missing the point of the parable can happen easily. In most of our homes, there is one parental request after another – for the mowing of the lawn, for the doing of one's homework, for the removal of one's backpack or the empty chips package from the dining room table to the picking up of one's clothes off the bedroom floor! One son says: "I don't think I have time," but somehow gets it done! The other says, "No problem!" But then, if there was no problem, then why is there still an empty soda can from yesterday evening sitting on the table in the living room the next morning? Jesus was the master of making a point by connecting us to life's everyday scenarios, and He did so again with the *Parable of the Two Sons*.

The *Parable of the Two Sons* is found only in Matthew, but it has a loose parallel of the application in Luke 7:29-30. The verses in themselves are significantly different than those found in Matthew, leaving us to believe that this parable in Matthew is derived from its own special source.

This parable, along with many others, is split into two parts. The first is the actual *Parable of the Two Sons*, contained in verses 28-30. This first point can be divided into the invitations and responses of the father to the two sons. The second point is the application of the parable, contained in verses 31-32. This point can be given four sub points, which are:

1. The faithful response of the first son.
2. The faithful response of tax collectors and harlots.
3. The contrast between the unbelief of the Jewish leaders and the faith of the tax collectors and harlots with respect to John the Baptist.
4. A repeated indictment of the Jewish leaders for their hard-heartedness.

The audience to which Jesus was speaking was primarily made up of the Jewish leaders and Pharisees of the day, and to these individuals He struck a nerve.

In Matthew's telling of the parable, Jesus invites the listeners to interact with Him in the statement **"What do you think?"** He then dives in and tells the captivating story of the father asking both of his sons to work in the vineyard. The 'figures' in the parable are compared metaphorically. The father is God, the vineyard is Israel, and the two sons are the two categories of people, those who obey, and those who do not. By the first son's refusal to do as his father asked, he is not only disobeying, but at the same time, showing rebellion against his father's authority. Eventually, the first son changes his mind and obeys his father's request.

It is important to understand the wording given in Matthew's account pertaining to the changing mind of the first son. The word given in the translation as repent truly is just that. It means to change one's mind, feeling regret for what one has done, or feeling remorseful over one's actions. The son feeling remorse is used to capture the sense of regret.

The father then moves to the second son who responds to his father's request in a way that reminds us of Elijah's response to God: **"Here am I"**. The second son agreed to go and even strengthened the affirmation of his agreement by referring to his father as 'lord'. After all of the very opposite actions of those of the first son, the second then decides not to work in the vineyard, breaking his promise.

Jesus then asks another question, a follow up to the first one, of the crowd that was gathered: **"Which of the two did the will of his father?"** Those answering were not aware of the judgment inflicted by what they were about to say. The elders and chief priests answered that of course, the first son was in the will of his father. By saying this,

“They [the chief priests and elders] correspond to the second son in that they claim to be workers in the vineyard, but they have failed in their duties.” (Hultgren, 221) Jesus’ reply to the religious leaders is then very direct: **31. “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots 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 harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.”**

What Jesus had just said was that those who did not heed the words of John the Baptist and, by rejecting him, they were effectively rejecting Jesus, which means they were rejecting the Father Whom they claimed they were serving! Jesus further insults those listening by painting a picture of **“tax collectors and harlots”** entering the Kingdom before the, the ‘righteous’ of Israel!

It is important to see that by entering the Kingdom before, or preceding the Pharisees, this did not exclude the latter from entering the Kingdom of God. On the contrary, they are welcome in the Kingdom, as are all of God’s children. Jesus is giving an invitation directly to those who rejected Him and His teachings.

The parable itself is really quite simple. It is an account of a man with two sons and a vineyard. The father tells his two sons to work in the vineyard. The first son says he will not go, but later regretted it and went. The second son said he would go, but did not actually do it. Jesus then explained the parable.

Jesus was applying this parable to the religious leaders of His day. They were like the second son, who said he would go, but did not. Whereas those tax collectors and harlots who repented at the preaching of John were like the first son who first said no, but then went and did the father’s will.

It all went back to John the Baptist who had come as a keeper of the law and who lived a simple, sacrificial lifestyle. This impressed the elders, scribes and Pharisees at first. However, when John demanded a true application of the law and demanded inward holiness, they rejected Him. Jesus said that they had rejected the counsel of John by refusing John’s baptism, which was unto the remission of sins. They felt that John’s baptism was only for **sinner**s, so it certainly could not apply to them whatsoever! Or so they thought.

It must have been a shock to hear Jesus tell them that those despised by the Jews would enter the Kingdom of God before their religious leaders! As Jesus issued a stinging denunciation to these ruling religious authorities, it dawned on them that He was comparing the religious leaders of the day to the first son. They did not enjoy hearing that the tax collectors and harlots were replacing them as God’s chosen ones. They had witnessed the miracles of Jesus, from turning water into wine to the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus did not fit their mold and would not conform to their agenda, and so they rejected Him. They were even now conspiring how that they might kill Him. But as Luke records in his gospel the tax collectors (and others) who accepted

John's baptism **“justified God”** whereas those religious leaders who were not baptized **“rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him”** in Luke 7:29-30 [RSV]. Jesus will have more to say concerning these religious leaders in His next two parables, but what important lesson can we draw from this parable for us today?

The main point of the parable is not that we must be “doers” and not “sayers”. It is the doing of God’s will from a repentant heart that matters to Him. Jesus emphasized this truth on other occasions as well. He did so in His *Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew 7:21-27. He did so while giving the Great Commission before His ascension to Heaven in Matthew 28:20. It is clear through a reading of Scripture that greatness in the Kingdom of God is measured in terms of one’s obedience to God! This lesson is sorely needed today.

The doctrines of “cheap grace” and “easy believism” have created a generation of “sayers” and not “doers.” Many profess Jesus as Lord, but then they do not do what He says to do. Why else would so many reject baptism, even though Jesus and His apostles gave it as a **command**?

Jesus asked in Luke 6:46 [RSV], **“Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?”** These people are like the second son, who says he will do the father's will, but does not. Misunderstanding the doctrine of **“salvation by grace through faith”**, many people have concluded that requiring obedience to God's command is “legalism” or “salvation by works of merit”. Yet nothing could be further from the truth! Keeping the commandments of God is essential to salvation! Many times Scripture teaches this, such as in Matthew 7:21-23; Matthew 28:20; John 14:15, 21, 23; John 15:10, 14; 1 Corinthians 7:19; and 1 John 2:3-4.

What we must remember is this. When we keep God's commandments, we in no way **earn** or **merit** salvation. We simply do that which is our duty to do, and we will always remain “unprofitable servants” who are saved by grace, such as in Luke 17:10 and Titus 3:4-7. Yet, we still **“should be careful to maintain good works”** according to Titus 3:1, 8, and 14.

Remember that it was the “religious leaders” in Jesus' day who **“rejected the purpose of God for themselves”** in not accepting John's teaching for the need for repentance and baptism. It was the “religious leaders” in Jesus' day that likely believed that they had good “theological grounds” for not heeding the simple commands of God given through His preachers. In similar fashion, many “religious leaders” of our day reject the clear teaching of Christ and His apostles concerning the commands to repent and be baptized as stated in Mark 16:15-16 and Acts 2:38. They reject the **“purpose of God for themselves”** based upon “theological grounds.” When the common man who reads without preconceived notions has no problem understanding what the Scriptures teach on the subject, could it be that today there are many people (even “tax collectors” and “harlots”) who will enter the Kingdom of God before many religious people do?

Jesus had fought a constant battle with these folks, since the day that He read the text of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue of Nazareth in Luke 4:18. Jesus denounced their ultra strict interpretation of the law while rejecting its weightier matters, such as justice and mercy in Matthew 23:23. I trust that we do not forget justice and mercy, because we all must have it.

Well, it is easy to keep hitting on those Scribes and Pharisees, is it not? But what about us? Do we try to make Jesus conform to our idea of righteousness, rather than vice versa? These fellows had commercialized the gospel of the day. How about us? They dissected and twisted the word of God to their own advantage. We do not do that, do we? They had no compassion for the great unwashed. Do we? They had forgotten that there was a place for God's mercy and grace in His word (Matthew 23:23).

In this day and age, it does not seem so strange to disobey the request of a parent. Our society is full of disobedient youngsters who have no respect for the adult figures of authority in their lives. Things were looked at in a completely different light during the time of Jesus' ministry. The importance of the relationship stressed here helps illustrate the weight of the 'child's' decision to the request of the father. In the parable, Jesus is condemning those who merely say and do not do. He is emphasizing the importance of faith with works. There must be actions to match the statements of those who believe.

An encouraging aspect of this parable is the acceptance of those who may reject God at first, but in the end decide to follow the teachings of Christ. The first son rebelled against his father as many believers do today. God is always accepting of those who want to return and offer themselves to Him. Likewise, God invites those who are like the Pharisees to come into the Kingdom. All have the chance to take part in God's glory.

The words of John illustrate the *Parable of the Two Sons* very well.

10. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world knew Him not. 11. He came to His own home, and His own people received Him not. 12. But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God; 13. who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:10-14 [RSV])

Jesus came to His own (Israel) first, but they rejected Him. Thus, the doors to the Kingdom were swung open to the vilest of people. We believed and obeyed His word and were washed in His blood and born of His Spirit. For this, we are eternally grateful and we desire to continue laboring in His vineyard that others might believe also and be saved.

What kind of "son" are you? Are you one who does the will of his Father? Or are you one who says he will do his Father's will, but in the end does not? How you respond to the commands of our Lord determines the difference.