

“A Tale of Two Sons”

Matthew 21:28-32

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Our passage this morning takes place in the last week of Jesus’ ministry. The chief priests and the elders have already decided they would destroy him. They are angry with him for cleansing the temple, and now they’re demanding, “Who gave you this authority?” (v. 23) They want an explanation for what he’s doing and teaching, so Jesus answers with a story.

There are three characters in this little story: a father and his two sons. It might remind you of another, more famous parable of Jesus that we call the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the two sons symbolize the same categories of people. In this one, Jesus invites his listeners into the story by asking “What do you think?” He’s setting them up for the question at the end of the parable and then for the point of the parable.

Setting: the vineyard is an image for the kingdom of God.

The good news of Jesus is all about the kingdom of God invading the world. That was, after all, what he announced from the beginning of his ministry. Now, from Old Testament times the vineyard had been an image to represent the kingdom. The prophet Isaiah said,

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel,
and Judah is the garden of his tender care. (Isaiah 5:7)

Asaph wrote in the Psalms,

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it. (Psalm 80:8)

Jesus refers to God’s people as a vineyard, too, in a parable right after the one for this morning, and he says the owner’s coming back one day to make an accounting for the work we do. (Matthew 21:33 ff.)

To work in the vineyard is to participate in the kingdom. It’s to do God’s work, and to enjoy fellowship with the Father and to fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

The parable revolves around the *invitation* of the father and the *response* of the sons. The father’s plea represents God’s invitation to come work in the vineyard. The sons don’t go to the father; the father comes to them. God always takes the initiative. He *invites* us to come. His grace is always first—it comes before we do anything to deserve it or even have any idea of what he’s up to.

Now Jesus wasn’t particularly commending either of the two sons. They had character flaws. They needed grace. Both of them were a problem. You see, it was natural for a father to ask his sons to go to work. Every father in Jesus’ culture would have expected labor and loyalty from his children. What *wasn’t* normal was the kids’ response to the father’s request.

The first son's response was to rebel.

He's impetuous. "Go work in the vineyard," father says, and the kid blurts out, "I will not!" In a traditional, patriarchal culture, you simply didn't do that. He's like the tax collectors and prostitutes, the rebels. They're on the fringes of faith; they hear the invitation of God, and they go their own way.

Why is the first son rude? Maybe because he doesn't see the father has his best interest at heart. "I'm not going to work in the vineyard," he growls. But there's a change: he changes his mind, repents, and in the end, he goes. The first son is an embarrassment in the morning, but what counts is the result at the end of the day.

The second son's response was to make an empty promise.

He cries, "Yes, sir, right away!" He responds not only with the right words, but also with *enthusiasm*. He's a joy in the morning. So enthusiastic. So compliant. But evening rolls around, and he's not in the vineyard. He has lied to his father. Not going after promising to go is worse than not promising in the first place. He doesn't rebel against his father to his face, but he undermines him in secret. He has the bigger problem, because he just tells his father what he thinks he wants to hear. In reality, he's not in the vineyard. He's not in a relationship with his father, and he's not in the kingdom. Have you ever known somebody to use words in this way? They say whatever they think you want to hear, but the words are empty. The second son is a joy in the morning, but a disappointment at the end of the day. Between the two boys, the son who refused to go out but changed his mind—that's clearly the better way of the two.

Jesus applies his story to his listeners.

Now, Jesus drives home the meaning of the parable: "Which of the sons did what the father wanted?" His listeners give the right answer: "The first." Then Jesus says a shocking thing. He says really bad people are getting saved, getting into the kingdom ahead of the good people. And he says why in verse 32:

For John came...and you did not *believe* him,

but the tax collectors and the prostitutes *believed* him.

And even after you saw this, you did not repent and *believe* him.

That's the center of the parable. It's about real faith, and Jesus is saying it's not enough to agree with God's word. Faith is doing the will of the Father.

The two sons represent the chief priests and elders on one hand, and the tax collectors and the prostitutes on the other. The respectable people, and the riff-raff.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes are like the first son.

When it comes to faith, there are two common reactions. One is to turn away from God's claim on your life. The kind of people who say, "I don't want to."

The riff-raff start off badly, but some of them get into the kingdom. In fact, they get into heaven ahead of the sharp and successful people, the religious leaders, those represented by the second son in the parable.

Jesus was saying, "You know those people you look down on? They're getting into heaven ahead of you!" Those people are broken, stuck in economic and sexual sin. They're rude, and at first refuse the invitation to the kingdom. But in the end, they *believe*. They show up to work in the vineyard. Faith is actually *doing* what the Father wants. It's not just being sincere or having good motives.

The respectable people are like the second son.

And then there's the kind who give a big "Yes, sir!" They're respectful, but some of those people don't ever really go to work in the vineyard.

They had good intentions. They responded like the second son, "I will, *sir!*" But in the end, they didn't show up to work in the vineyard. When they met God in the flesh face-to-face, they wouldn't follow him. Faith is more than saying the right thing. Our confession is an important starting place, but genuine faith always leads to right living.

So, what do we get out of the parable for our life?

Jesus is telling us the Father wants us to work in the vineyard.

James says it this way:

"What good is it, my brothers, if you a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (James 2:14)

He also says,

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (James 2:22)

Real faith is denying yourself and committing your whole life to God. If it's genuine faith, it will make a difference in all we do. It's not only our words that count, but our works, not only our lips, but our lives. Paul says,

"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love." (Gal. 5:6b)

Or as Luther said,

"O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works."¹

God wants us to work in the vineyard. And there's urgency to the call of God. *Today* is the day of salvation. Don't delay, but respond while you have the chance. Sure, we live in the hope of heaven. But we also have a work to do *now*. We are to be his disciples

Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, eds., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, second ed., (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 101.

now. In fact, maybe our work is more urgently our world today than it's been for a long time. Don't you get that feeling sometimes when you see our culture? Or as you see the earthquake and the overwhelming loss in Haiti this week? It's urgent that act like real disciples of Jesus, that we go deep in him and become persons of prayer, in working in the power of the Holy Spirit. It's urgent that we discover our spiritual gifts and share in God's work of transforming culture.

In the response of the two sons, there's both comedy and tragedy.

There's both comedy and tragedy in the way people respond to Jesus.

The second son is tragic. The one you think is going to get it sometimes falls away in the end. I know a lady who is brokenhearted because her son used to believe in Jesus and even worked for a Christian campus ministry, but he walked away from the faith. He started so well. But this isn't a parable about starting well. It's a story about finishing well. You don't see the real meaning of the day's events at breakfast, but only at dinner.

The first son is comic. Like him, some start out badly. They reject God's claim on their lives, you'd say they'll never believe, but in the end, they do. The one you think is never going to get it, in the end, sometimes that's the one who turns around. Maybe the kid who's the biggest problem in Sunday School, and in the end, he becomes a missionary who leads others to Jesus. That's the comic part of the gospel, the rebel who becomes the best Christian of all.

A lot of Christian conversions are like that.

Take Augustine. He had been thinking about becoming a Christian for a long time, but he thought "If I become a Christian, it'll wreck all my fun." He's the one who prayed, "God, give me chastity, make me sexually pure—but not yet." But in the end, he became a Christian, and the greatest theologian of the early church.

Then there's Malcolm Muggeridge, the communist journalist who became a great spokesman for the gospel.

And there's C. S. Lewis, the atheist who became the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century.

It reminds me of the evil emperor in "Return of the Jedi." He catches young Luke Skywalker and shoots him with bolts of lightening. Luke writhes on the floor in pain. His father, Darth Vader, on the side of the evil empire, stands watching.

The emperor says, "Now, young Skywalker, you will die."

Suddenly, Vader grabs the Emperor from behind. They struggle on the edge of the abyss, and Darth Vader hurls Emperor's into the bottomless shaft. Luke crawls to his father's side and pulls him away from the edge of the abyss to safety. Both the young Jedi and the warrior are too weak to move. Darth Vader, who was evil, turns to good and saves Luke Skywalker. Who would've expected it?

Nobody expected the tax collectors and prostitutes to believe, to show up in the kingdom. But they did. That's the comic side of the gospel. And Jesus says,

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:7)

So, what does the Father want from us? He wants faith—the kind of real faith that results in obedience. He wants us to put faith into action *today*.

Do you ever struggle with God? Get discouraged over failure? No matter what's going on in our lives right now, the right response is trust. Because Jesus Christ is the only one who can speak the last word over your life.

What matters in the long run is not if you can avoid the struggle, but to end up in the vineyard. I believe you're here in worship because you want to be in the kingdom when the day is through. To show up in the vineyard. To believe. And to do the work of the kingdom.

So have a long-term perspective of the kingdom. What's important isn't the beginning, but the end.