

Nineteenth Sunday of Easter – October 19, 2014
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Matthew 21:28-32 (NIV)

"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.' 29) " 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30) "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. 31) "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32) 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.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

I ran across this amusing little story from an old magazine. "Salespeople are so rude these days," complained a fellow in a leisure suit. "I went to a haberdasher to buy a tie and the salesman held one up for \$20. I said, 'Could you show me something cheaper?' So he held up a tie for \$10. I said, 'Could you show me something cheaper?' So he held up a tie for \$5. I said, 'You don't understand. I'd like to see something real cheap.' So he held up a mirror."

Sometimes, seeing something (especially ourselves) from a different perspective is like seeing it for the very first time. Jesus used parables to give people a different perspective on things they thought they had completely figured out.

Our text begins with a question. Jesus asks, "What do you think?" His question not only got the attention of those he wanted to teach but it involved them in the learning process. That suggests that a question would serve as an appropriate way for us to discuss this text so that we might become involved and active in the learning process. So let's answer a question.

Theme: What Can We Learn From The Two Sons?

Obviously there are lots of ways that we could answer this question. The answers that came to my mind were the following. We can learn that

1. Talk is Cheap
2. Actions Speak Louder Than Words
3. Blessed are Those who Hear the Word and Obey It

The phrase talk is cheap was a popular one among my classmates in high school. We'd use the phrase whenever we felt someone was bragging a bit too much. We wanted them to back up their words with actions – to show not just tell.

In Jesus' parable, **there was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 29) " 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30) "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.**

As we examine the actions of the second son we see an example of someone who failed to follow through. He talked the talk but didn't walk the walk. His talk was cheap. His words were empty and meaningless. He gave the impression of wanting to please his father: **"I will sir,"** he said. However, in the end, his actions told the real story – he did not go. His words oozed with love and respect but his actions showed his disrespect.

Jesus didn't spend much time embellishing this parable and there's no need for us to spend a lot of time discussing the details – speculating why the second son failed to act. What was important to Jesus was whether the people would apply what he was teaching them. Jesus was speaking to the priests and elders in the temple courtyard some of whom were also Pharisees. This text is really the tail end of his conversation with them. The time was very near the tragic climax and triumphant conclusion of Jesus' earthly ministry -- probably Tuesday of what we call Holy Week. Jesus was teaching the people when some of His primary critics and enemies approached. **"By what authority do you do these things?" the chief priests and elders asked. "And who gave you this authority?"** Jesus responded in one of His favorite ways of dealing with them. He answered their question with one of His own. He promised that He would answer their question if they would answer His first.

His question was a toughie: **"John's baptism -- was it from heaven, or from men?"** They immediately recognized it for what it was: one of those rock-and-a hard-place predicaments. If they said it was from heaven, then Jesus would counter by asking why they didn't believe John. However, if they said it was from men, the people would be upset because they believed John the Baptizer was a prophet. They answered with a favorite response of little children: "We don't know," they said.

Faithful to His promise, Jesus didn't answer their question either, but He did ask another one in the form of a parable. He introduced his story by asking them to offer an opinion – **"What do you think?"** Now it was time to hear their reaction so he asks: **"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"**

The real question that Jesus wanted them to be thinking about was similar to this question. *Who is doing the will of the heavenly Father?* That's what Jesus wants them to figure out. He hopes that by getting them to think about his illustration that they will better understand their own relationship with the heavenly Father. He intended for his parable to give them an opportunity to look at themselves in the mirror, so to speak.

The answer to Jesus' question isn't that hard to figure out, is it? The Father wanted his boys to work in the vineyard and that's what the son who said, "No," ultimately did. So the Jewish religious leaders responded in the same way that we might respond to that question: **"The first," they answered.** They were obviously oblivious to the point that Jesus was trying to make. They had not taken the time to really think about the point Jesus was trying to make. They hadn't taken a look in the mirror. Jesus' response must have caught them completely off guard.

Once they had committed themselves, Jesus said to them, **"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32) 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.**

It seems as if Jesus was saying that they could make the correct intellectual choice, but had made the opposite and wrong life choice. The chief priests and elders were like the second son, sitting in the "yea-and-amen corner" of the synagogue, but not doing the will of the Father. The tax collectors and the prostitutes were like the first son, at first refusing God's direction for their lives, but then repenting and following Him.

As you probably know, tax collectors and prostitutes were generally despised by most of the people in Judea. They were regarded as the scum of society – individuals who weren't even worthy of being ministered to. The religious leaders wrote them off as lost causes. But many of them repented of their sins and believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Like the rebellious first son, the tax collectors and prostitutes were saying, “No” to God’s gracious invitation. However, when John proclaimed sin and grace to them they repented. Few of the chief priests and elders had responded to John’s call for repentance. They didn’t even repent when they saw the example of others. Jesus is holding up a mirror for them and telling them that talk is cheap. You talk as if you are faithful children of the heavenly Father but you fail to do his will work. And just what is the work they failed to do? Jesus explains in John 6:29: **“The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”** Their actions spoke louder than their words – they rejected the one sent by the Father and ultimately had him arrested and crucified.

It would be easy for us to move right on to the next point – that we can learn from Jesus parable of the two Sons that those who listen to the Word and obey it are blessed. However, if we did that at this point we would fail to become involved in the learning process. It’s time for **us** to look into the mirror! And what do we see?

Well one of the things we might notice is that at times we have some things in common with each of the two sons in Jesus’ parable. And although it may not be as easy to admit, we would also have to say that at times we have some things in common with the religious leaders and may be even with the tax collectors and sinners.

If we’ve ever had to wrestle with a self righteous, holier than thou attitude and a lack of desire to get to work in the Lord’s kingdom; if we’ve ever said one thing and done another we’ve acted just like the second son. Our talk is cheap. Our actions have spoken louder than words. Our sinful nature has gotten the best of us and the good that we want to do we have not done. Jesus’ parable calls us to repent of those sins and to rejoice in the forgiveness he offers us.

On the other hand, there are those who may find it a bit easier to identify with the first son – the one who changed his mind after he said, “No.” There were times in your life when you knowingly and willingly refused to follow God’s will and way. You sort of hit rock bottom, so to speak but by the grace of God you were called to repentance and faith. We may not even remember it; but each and everyone of us was in that situation at one time or another in our life. That’s the way we were when we were born – our sinful nature was incapable of anything but sin. But in his grace the Lord called us to faith and brought us into his family.

Although Jesus told his parable to those who were outside of God’s family it still holds some lessons for us – who by his grace have become members of his family. There is the warning that talk is cheap and the reminder that actions speak louder than words. Or to quote a passage of Scripture: (James 1:22) **Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

There is also in this text the wonderful comment about those who are entering the kingdom of heaven. Those words remind us of the blessings of grace that await those who are part of the family of God. In gratitude for those blessings, we’ll be eager to respond to the call and invitation of our heavenly Father to work for him in his kingdom. We’ll say, “yes” when he calls and we’ll gladly go. His Law will be a guide for a life of thankfulness and joy. We will enjoy the blessings of grace that the Lord promises to those who remain faithful to him. We’ll experience what Jesus had in mind when he said, **“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”**

There’s just one more lesson for us to take home from this text today. The reason Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees was that he truly wanted them to become part of his kingdom. This parable assures us that there is forgiveness for all. We need that assurance because of our sins and failures. Humbly we confess that even though we are part of the kingdom we don’t always do what the word says. We’re not always eager workers. We don’t always obey. And so we’ll rejoice in the Lord’s gracious call to repentance and faith. As forgiven sinners we’ll gladly share the forgiveness and love of our Lord with others.

Jesus question, “What do you think?” really was a call to repentance and faith. May the Holy Spirit enable us to answer that call with repentance and willing service. Amen.