

“The Two Sons”

Matthew 21:23-32

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Matthew 21 opens with Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a foal where he is hailed by the crowds as their Deliverer, their Savior- "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" they all proclaim. Immediately afterward, he enters the Temple and drives out the merchants and money changers, telling them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers." With such provocative acts like these, Jesus has further antagonized the religious leaders. They ask by what authority he has to do and say the things he does but rather than answer them directly, he tells them a parable about a father and his two sons which, similar to the story of the prodigal, involves two siblings who couldn't be any more different.

Here, their father requests that both of them go out into the vineyard to work. The first son refuses, but afterward he repents of his refusal and does what his father asks of him. The second son, who at the outset seems ALL-TOO WILLING to obey his father, reneges on his promise and DOESN'T. In conclusion, Jesus asks, "Which of the two did the will of the father?" His listeners agree that it is the first son, the one who had initially refused but then thought better of it. Then says Jesus, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John (the Baptist) 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." With these words, he thrusts a sharp sword into the hearts of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Temple priests essentially accusing them that for all their pious religiosity, they still refuse to do God's will and thus remain far from his kingdom.

As much as this story is directed to the religious leaders of his day, it is NO LESS directed to Christians in our OWN age; EVERY ONE of us can identify with either or both of these two sons. I think back to how many times as a teenager, my father would call upstairs to my room early on a Saturday morning and say, "David, get down here and mow the lawn!" With one eye open, I'd yell back, "Yeah, dad! I'll be down in a minute," and then roll over in my bed and go back to sleep. Ten minutes later, I'd hear my dad once again call up the stairs, "David, are you going to get down here and mow the lawn?" Again, in a sleepy haze, I'd yell back, "Yeah, dad, I'm already on my way" and then shut my eyes again. But then ten minutes after that, I'd feel something wet on my head. My eyes would pop open and there would be my father standing over me with a glass of water in his hand, slowly pouring its contents over my face. You can bet I got out of bed THEN! It's not that my intentions were wrong- only that though the spirit might have been willing, the flesh was weaker. I WAS going to get around to it, but in MY time rather than my father's.

One of the occupational hazards of ministry, ESPECIALLY in the first few years, is the temptation to try to please all the members. Believe me, nothing will drive someone out of the

ministry FASTER than that- trying to please EVERYONE when it's just impossible. As I had to discover for myself, the hardest thing to learn--ESPECIALLY when you're a young pastor--is to establish limits and say "no" to people. After all, you think that because you're a minister, you're in the BUSINESS of trying to please persons. And so you tell one person you'll do one thing and to another, something ELSE, and soon you discover yourself so over-committed that it becomes impossible to fulfill ANY of your obligations adequately. Then on TOP of that, you feel so darn guilty that you become angry at YOURSELF for failing your flock, and angry at the CHURCH for making so many demands on your time, and even angry at GOD for calling you into such a thankless vocation in the first place. Again, it's not that I was being deliberately deceptive- only that in my effort to please everyone, I ended up not pleasing ANYBODY, ESPECIALLY myself. It wasn't until I made myself clear to the congregation by spelling out what my priorities had to be and informing them what it was I could and could not do that I began enjoying ministry once again.

Well the meaning of this parable is not TOO hard to figure out. It obviously involves the problem of lip service versus action and the MUCH DEEPER issue of hypocrisy as opposed to honesty. Scripture is clear that if we are TRUE followers of Jesus Christ, then we are to be more than just "hearers" of the word but actual "DOERS" of the word. The IDENTITY of the characters in the parable is not hard to figure out. The FATHER is God; the FIRST SON represents those sinners who make no pretense to being holy and yet when they honestly encounter God and the spirit of Truth, they humbly submit themselves to it and then do what is right; and the SECOND SON is the religious leaders- the pharisees and the sadducees, the priests and the scribes; those hypocrites who love to make a big show of their religiosity and yet have no intention of performing the will of God.

Jesus was saying that it is very easy for religious people to make all kinds of grandiose promises to God and then fail to live up to their promises. How often do we as Christians assure God, "O yes, God, I will be your faithful disciple. I will carry out the mission of the church. I will do your work in the world. You can count on me, Lord." But then they don't do a darn thing, often lapsing into what some people call "Chreasters"- those members you only see at Christmas and Easter time. I once was talking to a fellow in the hospital who upon discovering I was a minister proudly said he worshipped at the "Holiday Inn." I asked, "What do you mean?" and he said, "Well, when there's a HOLIDAY, you can find me IN church." The church is FULL of such members who worship at the altar of a "holiday in" with the result that God then finds some LESS churchy people who actually WILL work on behalf of his kingdom.

Do we know such persons- people who easily and often profess great love for God and yet their actions belie their supposed commitments? The fact is that we LIVE with them, we WORSHIP with them, we SEE them face-to-face every morning when we look into the mirror. By that I mean that EVERYONE of us is just such a person- someone who is well-meaning, someone possessing the best of intentions, and yet someone who still falls far short of the commitments we all-too glibly make.

Consider for a minute some of those vows we Christians often find ourselves making and let's begin with BAPTISM. Now before I can baptize ANY child, the Book of Order says the

parents must first be instructed in what that sacrament represents. During my meeting with them, I remind them that by standing at that altar and before both God and that congregation, by presenting their child for baptism, they do publicly declare that they want their child to study him, know him, love him and to serve as our Lord's chosen disciple. However, this can only be achieved if they are actively involved in that church or some other congregation. If they have no real intention of following through with their promise and becoming active participants in one, then their child will never have the chance to know or experience that love THEMSELVES and the sacrament will devolve into nothing more than an empty formality instead of the sacred life-changing event it is intended to. If you, as a parent, presented at one time your OWN children for baptism, then you TOO have stood in this place and made SIMILAR promises before God and this congregation.

But there is yet ANOTHER vow that takes place during that same sacrament, one that God expects THE REST OF US to take JUST AS seriously. After publicly professing their commitment to be active members of the church and to faithfully raise their child in it, there is then a FOLLOW-UP question- one posed to the CONGREGATION INSTEAD. An elder representing the session stands up and asks, "Do YOU, the people of the church, promise to tell this new disciple the good news of the gospel, to help him or her know all that Christ commands, and by your fellowship, to strengthen his or her family ties with the household of God?" With one voice, everyone responds that they will. Now this question is important because as Presbyterians and members of the Reformed Tradition, we don't have "godparents" as the Roman Catholics typically have, that is, with one or two persons designated as such. Rather, the ENTIRE CONGREGATION functions as one GREAT godparent to that child. Then following a closing prayer, the sacrament is concluded.

Let me remind you that if you DID say "yes!" to one of those two questions- either in your role as parent or the congregation's role as god-parent, then BEWARE as God is holding each of us accountable to our word- a promise we were making TO GOD even as we were to that child! God thus says to everybody involved, "Woe to you if you fail to live up to your promise to these little ones. It would be better for you if a millstone was place around your neck and you were thrown into the center of the sea." You see, God wants us to take just as seriously OUR word when we give it even as GOD seriously takes his OWN.

Or what of the vows made when you publicly declared your desire to become a member of a church. You solemnly pledged to trust Jesus Christ in all things, to obey his word, and to show his love in all that you do; you promised to be a faithful member of that congregation, giving of yourself in every way- even serving in the various offices of the church and presbytery. These are among the HIGHEST SET OF STANDARDS one can possibly be held to. Have you taken your word seriously? Are you living up to your promises- before God and his people?

Or how about the MOST IMPORTANT vow you probably ever made in your life, the day you stood before an altar and swore before God that you would love your partner- in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live. And yet, just how realistic WAS that. How do you make a life-time promise when you have absolutely no idea what will happen tomorrow or next year, much less for the REST of your life?

What if your partner becomes unfaithful as has become so common in many marriages? What if your spouse is rendered mentally unstable, or is maimed or handicapped from a tragic accident. Are you still going to love that person on the basis of a promise made while you stood half-conscious in front of some perspiring preacher?

Jesus certainly understood the human propensity for making promises and he CAUTIONED his disciples about it. In his Sermon on the Mount, he said:

*But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.*

James, the brother of our Lord, repeated the same in his epistle when he said, "Let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no."

Jesus was saying that if we are known as a people who keeps their word, then such vows become utterly unnecessary. People won't second-guess you. They won't view your words with suspicion. The fact is that honest people do not NEED to resort to oaths. Oaths arise because we are so often liars or at least given to exaggeration and hyperbole, and the more we employ such expressions, the more we devalue human language and human promises. Hence, Christ warns us about making promises, ESPECIALLY if we know we might have trouble fulfilling them or have no intention AT ALL of following through on them. We MUST be a people of our word because whether we follow through on our commitments or not speaks to the kind of INTEGRITY, the kind of CHARACTER we possess. If we constantly lie or shade the truth or even with the best of intentions make promises we consistently fail at, then it speaks to our inability to be TRUSTED; and if we can't be trusted, then no real, deep, or lasting relationship with ANYBODY can EVER be established or maintained. It then becomes impossible to become ANY kind of witness to Jesus Christ.

Let me end by saying that as Christians, we are to be a people who say what we mean and mean what we say, that ONLY THEN will people ever take us seriously as disciples of our Lord and as living repositories of his truth. WITHOUT such integrity in our speech and our intentions, we discredit Christ and his Church, demonstrating that the truth is not in us. If only we could follow the example which was set by the Essenes- the Essenes being that Jewish sect that lived during the time of Jesus and was responsible for writing and preserving the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was the great Roman historian Josephus who said of them:

*They are eminent for fidelity and are the ministers of peace- whatsoever they say is FIRMER than an oath. Swearing is avoided by them which they esteem as worse than perjury, for they say that he who cannot be believed without swearing by God, is already condemned.*

Let us pray: *Gracious God, forgive us for being so glib, so irresponsible with our tongue. May we be a people of real conviction, that is, persons who say what we mean and mean what we say. May we always strive to be a people of integrity and character, persons who can be trusted because our word is our bond, just as your word is to US. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*