
THE TWO CLASSES OF PEOPLE IN THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONSSermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, 2017

Matthew 21:28-32

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is taken from Matthew 21:28-32, the second part of our Gospel reading read before, the parable of the two sons: **“What do you think of this? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today!’**

²⁹ **“He answered, ‘I do not want to.’ Later he changed his mind and went.**

³⁰ **“The father went to the other one and told him the same thing. He answered, ‘I shall, sir,’ but he did not go.**

³¹ **“Which of the two did what the father wanted?”**

They answered, “The first.”

Jesus told them, “Truly, I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”³² For John came to you teaching you the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. However, even when you had seen that, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Out of the four Gospels, Matthew is the only one to record this parable for us. Jesus was describing two different groups of people living in His time, but His words certainly have much to say to us and the people of our day as well.

The first thing we notice in the parable is that it is the father who went to his sons and not the other way around. That’s how it is in God’s relationship with us - God always takes the initiative. What we say and do is always a response to what God has said and done.

The first son in this parable corresponds to the penitent tax collectors and prostitutes, and the second son corresponds to the unbelieving Jewish religious

leaders of Jesus' day: The Pharisees and Sadducees, the chief priests, elders, and teachers of the law.

The first group, like the first son, disrespected and disobeyed God by initially refusing to listen to Him and His commands. **A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today!' 'He answered, 'I do not want to.'**

When God came to the tax collectors and prostitutes with His Word and told them to **work in the vineyard today**, that is, to work in His kingdom, they defiantly said "*No! We don't want to,*" and went on their merry way of sinning and doing as they pleased. However, like that first son, after a while, perhaps after hearing God's Word preached again by John the Baptist and Jesus, many of those sinful people in Israel "repented" of their sinful ways. To repent means to literally change one's mind. By the grace of God they now believed in the free forgiveness of Christ, and believed that He had come to win them from the devil, and so off they went in serving Him by working in God's "vineyard" [His kingdom].

On the other hand, the Pharisees and religious leaders of that day were like that second son. **"The father went to the other one and told him the same thing,** (that is, to go and work in the vineyard). **He answered, 'I shall, sir,' but he did not go.**

The Pharisees and religious leaders were outwardly obedient and were always insisting that they were doing the will of God and serving Him and following His laws, but they were inwardly disobedient because they never believed in God's Son, Jesus. They never confessed their sinfulness to Him, or turned to Him and Him alone for salvation. Therefore, because of the absence of faith and their misguided self-righteousness they did not love and serve Jesus, and therefore, they never really worked in God's "vineyard" [His kingdom] even though they were the first to say, **'I shall, sir.'** "*You can count on me; I'll be there!*" This response reminds us of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven,*" (Matthew 7:21).

Jesus then asked the question in our text: **"Which of the two did what the father wanted?" They answered, "The first."**

The answer to the Lord's question involved obedience, or "doing," but it is not a "doing" that is ever separated from faith! Jesus commends the tax collectors and

prostitutes for believing the preaching of John the Baptist, and He condemns His enemies because they did not repent and believe. That is the key that was missing from the Pharisees and self-righteous religious leaders: **Repentance!** Repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning toward Jesus in faith for forgiveness of sins. The tax collectors and prostitutes Jesus speaks of did both; the unbelieving religious leaders did neither! Doing the will of the heavenly Father, then, is first of all, believing in His Son Jesus for salvation. Good works will always be produced by true faith, not the other way around. As Martin Luther says, faith is “*a living, busy, active, mighty thing!*” However, meticulous attention to the details of the Law was not what Jesus was looking for, and it was this that the Pharisees and scribes had made as their focus and their hope of salvation. Their failure was their refusal to believe the Word of God spoken by His own messengers, and His very own Son, Jesus.

Now here’s a question for us to ask ourselves. Are we doing what the Father wants? Which son have we been? The first son or the second son?

Have we been like the rebellious and disrespectful first son? Are there unrepented sins in our lives that need confessing and disposing of at the foot of the cross? Is there sinful, God-dishonouring behaviour in our lives that needs to be turned from so that the light of Christ can once again shine through us? If so, then we must not wait any longer to do what the first son eventually did in Jesus’ parable: turn from our sin - repent and turn to Jesus and believe in Him for full forgiveness and strength to do the will of our Father in heaven. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of our urgent need for repentance, “*Therefore, while the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.*”² *For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened... again He appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”* (Hebrews 4:1, 2, 7). The Apostle Paul also writes, “*In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation*” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

We must be like those tax collectors and prostitutes who heard the preaching of John the Baptist and repented. Much can even be learnt from Rahab, the prostitute in the Old Testament, who saw and understood the judgment coming toward her

land in the armies of Israel, and repented. She knew what she deserved, but repented. Again, think of all those reluctant Prophets of Israel, who laid aside their fears, their excuses, their aversion to God's call, and instead regretted their reluctance and took up the work God had for them to do.

But what about the second son in the parable? We can't ignore the message there either. Have we been more like him? Are we all talk and no action? Is all our talk about faith cheap because our lives are saying something else? Do our actions speak louder than our words? The Apostle James says, "*But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also*" (James 2:18, 26). Have we made and broken countless promises to God that we will "*turn over a new leaf*" in our spiritual lives?

Perhaps the problem isn't laziness or spiritual apathy; maybe it's a self-righteous attitude like the Pharisees had. Does the fact that we come to church every Sunday and live a pretty good moral life (at least better than most people) tempt us to think and believe that we are somehow "less sinful" than others, or "better" than people who live openly sinful lives? Deep down inside do we really believe that because we come from a good Christian family, or because we've practically got our own pew space at church on Sunday morning, and always show up that, somehow, in some sort of way that that's earning some points with God; "*That's what I've been doing for Him so that has got to be making Him happy?*" If we are not fully and completely placing our trust in the righteousness that Christ earned for us by His perfect obedience, then all those "works" we think God is going to be so happy with are nothing but "*filthy rags*" in His sight! If we think for a second that our own works that we're so proud of have helped pay for even one of our sins, then all of our sins will stick to us and stain our souls and condemn us eternally! Remember, the devil is the master at massaging our sinful pride and self-righteous hearts. He is also the master of blinding us to the fact that we can be very "busy" working in and for the church, but never really do anything that furthers the work of the vineyard of God's Kingdom. Have any of us, who are very serious about spiritual things and talk very seriously about the importance of the purity of God's Word, let ourselves down by striving to keep God's Word for ourselves and not sharing this news to others who are in genuine need of the Gospel? The Gospel is the Good News, and we all have the job of spreading the Gospel of salvation

through Jesus Christ to the lost (which is THE focus of the Scriptures). Forgiveness, love, mercy, compassion – these are what the world needs to hear.

If we have the pure Word, then we ought to be telling others about Christ! If these have not been our attitudes and actions then they also need to be repented of today! The Scriptures are clear, and Jesus even implies it in this parable that it is always the right time to repent. Because God is patient, because He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,¹ He waits. And that means for you, for me, the time to repent is today!

So, who are we in this parable? May we be a third type of son, the ones who says, “*Here am I, send me!*” and will go and work in the Lord’s vineyard! It’s not too late, it’s never too late, to make a change by the power of the Holy Spirit, to say “yes” to God and do God’s work. There’s a whole vineyard out there that needs to be harvested; there’s a lot of people out there, some in our neighbourhood or even in our family, who need to hear the good news of Jesus, who are just waiting for an invitation to come and see what church is all about. So let’s pick up our tools and get doing. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for Your wisdom, power, and holiness. But, above all, we worship You for Your goodness and forgiving love to all who call on You. You have changed us from enemies into friends through the sufferings and death of Your Son, who became a human being for our sakes. We are Your children, and come to You confidently in His name with our prayers and requests.

Give us an awareness of Your majesty and power, and that holy fear of You that is the basis of all true wisdom. Continue to supply our daily needs, giving us life and breath, health and contentment, and protection from every kind of danger to body and soul.

Especially look with mercy on our moral and spiritual weakness. By Your Holy Spirit free us from the evil from which we cannot free ourselves, and give us new life through faith in Jesus Christ. May Jesus speak His word of forgiveness to us, and become the ruler of our consciences, the focus of our wills, the centre of our

¹ 2 Peter 3:9

motives, and the Lord of our lives. Let Christ's love for us fill Your Church. Enable all Your people to know more of the vastness of that love, although it can never be fully known. In its power may they love one another in the family of faith, show loving sympathy to all in need, and offer forgiveness to all their enemies. Fill us with such love for each other that we may avoid placing any obstacle that would cause a brother to sin against his over-scrupulous conscience.

Show the nations of the earth the fullness of Your goodness and grace, that they may turn to You, the only true God, and find salvation in Your Son Jesus Christ. Lord, You have been gracious to our land. Continue to bless us, that more and more may turn from evil, come to faith, and be made rich by Your gifts.

We pray also for a special measure of Your blessing on those who sorrow or mourn, those who suffer pain or sickness, and those who face temptation or danger. Because we ourselves deserve Your chastening and discipline, help us to receive in patience and humility whatever You send in our lives, knowing that You are lovingly preparing us for eternal fellowship with You.

O Lord, You are able to do so much more than we can ever ask for or even think of. Hear these prayers, and provide all our other needs, in the name of our blessed Redeemer and Lord Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

¹ The Word of the LORD came to me: ² "What do you people mean when you use this proverb about the land of Israel, 'The fathers eat unripe fruit, and the children's teeth feel dull?' ³ As surely as I live," declares the Lord GOD, "you will certainly not use this proverb in Israel any more. ⁴ Look! All persons belong to Me. Both the soul of the father and soul of the son alike belong to Me. The person who sins is the one who will die"...

²⁵ "Yet you (people) say, 'The behaviour of the Lord is not fair.' Please listen, you family of Israel! Is My behaviour not fair? Are not the ways you behave the ones that are not fair? ²⁶ When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and acts unjustly, he will die for those things. He will die because of the unjust things that he has been committing. ²⁷ Moreover, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness that he has been committing and does what is just and right, he will save his life. ²⁸ Because he has considered all the rebellious

acts that he has been committing and has turned away from them, he will certainly live. He will not die.²⁹ Yet the family of Israel says, ‘The behaviour of the Lord is not fair.’ Are the ways in which I behave not fair, you family of Israel? Are your ways not the ones that are unfair?

³⁰ “Therefore, family of Israel, I shall judge each of you according to his conduct,” declares the Lord GOD. “Repent, and turn away from all your rebellious acts, so that sin may not cause your downfall.³¹ Cast away from you all your rebellious acts, which you have been committing! Make yourselves new hearts and new spirits. Why should you die, O family of Israel?³² For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord GOD. “Therefore repent, and live!”

Philippians 2:1-18

¹ Therefore, if you have any encouragement in Christ, if you have any comfort from His love, if you have any fellowship of the Spirit, if you have any tenderness and compassion,² make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being harmonious, and setting your minds on the same thing!³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as

being better than you are!⁴ Each of you should look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others!

⁵ Have the same attitude as Christ Jesus had!⁶ Although He was in the form of God, yet He did not consider His equality with God as a prize to exploit.⁷ Instead, He emptied Himself, took on the form of a slave, and became like other human beings; and when He was found in the appearance of a human being,⁸ He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.⁹ That is why God also has very highly exalted Him, and given Him the name that is above every other name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth may kneel,¹¹ and that everyone may confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only when I have been with you but also even more now that I am absent, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling!¹³ For it is God who continues to work in you both to be willing and to be doing according to his good purpose.¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing,¹⁵ so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God without blame

in a crooked and depraved generation, among whom you shine like stars in the universe,¹⁶ as you cling to the Word of life, so that I may boast on the day of Christ that I have not been running for nothing or labouring for nothing!¹⁷ However, even if I am being poured out like a drink offering while I am offering your faith as a sacrificial service, I am glad, and rejoice with you all.¹⁸ In the same way you should also be glad and rejoice with me!

Matthew 21:23-32

²³ When He had come to the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching. They asked, “By what authority are You doing these things?” and “Who has given You this authority?”

²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I also shall ask you one thing. If you tell it to Me, I too shall tell you by what authority I am doing these things.²⁵ From where did the baptism of John come? Was it from heaven or from men?”

They discussed it among themselves: “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will ask us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’²⁶ However, if we say,

‘From men,’ — we are afraid of the crowd. For they all regard John as a prophet.”

²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”

Then He also told them, “Neither do I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸ “What do you think of this? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today!’

²⁹ “He answered, ‘I do not want to.’ Later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰ “The father went to the other one and told him the same thing. He answered, ‘I shall, sir,’ but he did not go.

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