

DOING WHAT THE FATHER WANTS
Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020
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: 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 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,

On almost every occasion when Jesus would meet with the religious leaders of the Jewish people, there was a clash of wits and wills, a clash between right and wrong, truth and error, light and darkness, God and Satan. Time and again Jesus’ enemies would learn from bitter experience that in *all things He was the victor*. Nevertheless, in their blind hatred for Him, they would keep on assailing Him, only to leave once more, licking their wounds. Their hatred for Jesus increased until at last; they thought they had a victory by nailing Him to the cross.

On Jesus’ part, it was evident that mercy and grace flowed like a stream. Every lesson He taught was a lesson from a Teacher who loved His pupils even though they were often disobedient and impenitent. His words could be pointedly sharp, but then they were as instruments in the hands of a surgeon, not in the hands of an executioner. Jesus always had the desire to heal, never to slay.

Last Sunday we heard the parable of the landowner who had gone out to hire workers for his vineyard.¹ We learnt that God deals with us based on His grace and love instead of based on what we think is fair and just and that no matter when a man enters the Kingdom, late or soon, he is equally dear to God. Today, once again using a parable of a vineyard, Jesus condemns the religious leaders for their past behaviour by their own words, but also shows them the better way that is still open for them if they will repent and believe. At the same time, He gives encouragement to those who have learned to do the Father’s will in repentance and faith.

This is definitely a text for our times. As in the days of Jesus, the majority rejected the call of the Gospel while only a few heeded the call, so today only a few hear and believe, while the great majority close their hearts toward it in willful unbelief. The question, then, as to who it is that is doing the heavenly Father’s will, is as important and urgent today as ever it was. This is the chief point of the parable of the two sons before us today.

Jesus says, **“A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today!’”** What they said and did in response to their father’s will is the notable point of the parable.

Let’s look at the second son’s promising answer first. **“I shall, sir,”** he said. This son appeared to be ready and willing to do his father’s will, and, no doubt, his father rejoiced to see such willingness to work. Unfortunately, however, his promise to go to work had not been sincerely given. He said he would go, but he **“did not go.”** His deeds contradicted his words. He turned out to be a “yes-sayer” and “no-doer.” In the light of his refusal to go to work, his nastier promise lost all its value. It was nothing more than an empty gesture pointing to a cold and unloving heart. As far as he was concerned, his father’s will remained undone.

¹ Matthew 20:1-16

That part of the story was clear. All who heard the parable would have agreed when Jesus asked the question, **“Which of the two did what the father wanted?”** that it was not this son who did it, but very few were ready for the application that Jesus then made. It must have struck them like a blow to be told, **“Truly, I tell you, tax-collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”**² **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.”**

It was easy for Jesus to pass from the earthly story to its heavenly meaning. In no uncertain way the will of God, their heavenly Father, had been proclaimed to them. Jesus pointed to the work that John the Baptist had done among them. Sent by God, he had sought from his listeners’ a true repentance, a thorough turning away from their sinful and wicked living; and had pointed them to Jesus as the Lamb of God sent to take away their sins.² Where the earthly father had said, **‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today!’** the heavenly Father had been saying, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

But what happened? In a manner of speaking, things looked okay, as they did at first with the son who said, **‘I shall, sir.’** They were leaders in the Jewish Church and seemed to be very faithful sons of Abraham, but they were not sincere. Despite their profession of godliness with their mouth and lips, their hearts were far from good. Their religion was outward only, hollow and shallow. Jesus showed them up in their true colours. As yet, they had no place in God’s vineyard, in His kingdom. So badly situated were they that Jesus said, **“Truly, I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”** That even the good example of these otherwise despised people did not bring them to repentance and faith condemned them only the more. They seemed to be in God’s kingdom, doing His will, but actually, they were outside of it, *with no intention of doing His will*. They would not repent and would not believe.

We still have the same kind of people amongst us today. If only those to whom the Gospel of God’s forgiveness has been proclaimed, who have heard it but do not believe it, would at least be honest about it and not make some pretence about being in God’s family! Actually, of course, we would rather see that all who hear would come honestly to repent and joyfully to believe, but that has never happened as yet, and it never will happen. We shall always have some in the outward fold of the church who are just plain hypocrites, and there will always be many merely calling themselves Christians, and claim for some reason or other to be doing the will of God, busy in doing many things, perhaps, but actually doing nothing in God’s vineyard, because they have not repented of their sins and have not sought the pardon for sin that can be had only in the name of Jesus.

When we apply this parable to ourselves, we must ask, when we sing of our consecrating our lives and all to the Lord - do we always? When we promise at the Lord’s altar to be faithful to Him - are we, always? The will of our heavenly Father is revealed to us in the Bible: we know it: but are we always willing to do it? Far too often we are like the son who promised well but failed so badly when that promise should have been carried out. And we can think of another type of son, one not mentioned in the parable because the Lord had no wish to stress such a case as his on this occasion, and that is a son who both said “yes” eagerly, and then as eagerly went out to do his father’s will. If only we were such a one instead of the insincere, unrepentant and unbelieving person in the church and yet outside of it, who is represented by the son who said, **‘I shall, sir’**, but did not go.

Far better than the son of whom we have just spoken was the other one, not because he was a model in all respects, but because he at least did finish well even though he made an inexcusably bad beginning.

Brief and to the point are the words of the Saviour that describe the conduct of this son. When the father expressed his will: **“Son, go and work in the vineyard today!”** He answered, **‘I do not want to.’** **Later he changed his mind and went.”**

There was no beating about the bush or hypocrisy in that reply, and that is about all we can say in its favour. Even to say that it was an honest reply would be giving it too great an honour. It was crass disobedience, sheer disrespect, and a sin against God as well as against the father. There was no excuse for it. It may have been ill-considered, but it showed signs of a selfish and self-willed state of mind that seemed not to have grasped the very beginnings of decent and respectful behaviour. At the point of time when this son was confronted by the

² John 1:29

will of his father, he was just plain bad, good-for-nothing. Remembering that, we are even more grateful and delighted at his later change of mind. It is that change of mind, and of the good that followed on that change of mind, that we should remember. We feel sure that a father who at first had been extremely disappointed in him was now very happy, and the son was working in the vineyard, himself also happy.

When He spoke of this son, Jesus had in mind a class of people vastly different from the class of religious leaders to whom He had addressed this parable. Here He was referring to the hardened and open sinners, those who were regarded by most of their fellowmen as being quite hopelessly outside of the Church and beyond its saving message. Yes, it was the tax collectors to whom Jesus referred, men of a bad reputation in the community, known for their roguery in the matter of collecting dues and taxes. They were almost considered to be without hearts and souls worth saving. And in any case, they did not want to be saved. Their whole life was a stubborn ‘no’ against every offer and opportunity of moral growth and betterment. They were outcasts, and for them, there was only contempt and scorn. Then there were the women of ill-fame, the prostitutes. Their life, too, was an abandonment of self to vice and crime. Their life, too, shouted a loud “no” to the will of God for godly conduct and for salvation.

But what had happened? What was still happening, among these social and moral outcasts? The son who had spoken a wicked “no” repented, and went to do what at first, he had no intention of doing. So it was with many of these tax collectors and prostitutes, whose lives had seemed to be a flat denial of everything that was godly. Yet Jesus said, **“Truly, I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you teaching you the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed him.”** What a glorious change had come into their lives! They had repented in great numbers at the preaching of John the Baptist, and had turned from their sin, and were still turning to see and to hear Jesus, from whom they had hopes of receiving more than from anyone else in the world. In Him, they found sympathy, friendship, and, above all, healing for their moral sores, pardon for their sins. They had been “no-sayers” but, by the grace of God were now “yes doers.” What a wonderful change to behold! It brought joy to the heavenly Father’s heart who saw them now at work in His vineyard, in the kingdom of God, holding their place through repentance and faith. It brought joy to their souls, for they had found a place of rest for their souls in the gracious love of God.

In the first stage of their lives, perhaps also in their first reaction towards the loving offers of God, these people were not models. Still, in their repentance, they stand before us as real models of what it means to do the will of the heavenly Father. We can also be sure that coming to faith, fruits of that faith would have followed. Truly they became workers in God’s vineyard on whom their self-righteous accusers could not, conscientiously, cast any stones.

These kinds of people are also still with us. Many who have been known for vice rather than for virtue are converted by the grace of God in later life. The door of God is never closed to repentant sinners, no matter what class or brand they are. The invitation remains for all to receive Jesus as the Messiah and Saviour. So far, the religious leaders had rejected Him, but the door was never closed on them either. If they would repent and believe the Gospel, salvation would be for them as well.

Being brought into God’s kingdom through our baptism, we trust that by God’s grace we are still His children, working in His vineyard, showing all the characteristics of good sons and daughters such as repentance, faith and love. And that is, of course, much better than to have been left dangerously in sin for some time. For, as we said before, we can conceive of a third son of the father, one who right from the outset had been both “yes-sayer” and “yes-doer.” We must say this lest some may deliberately decide to say “no” to God’s pleadings for the moment, hoping someday, after they have enjoyed the so-called “pleasures” of sin to the full, to change over to the better way because they know that others have made the change.

Let such remember that what these tax collectors and prostitutes did before they became children of God who did their Father’s will, is not meant to stand as a good example. No, it merely helps to show up in its rare beauty the super-abundant grace of God for sinners. Those who deliberately choose to say “no” may never get the opportunity to say “yes.”

Doing the Father's will, that is, working in His vineyard, consists of repentance, faith, and the fruits of faith. It means that we acknowledge our sins before God, that we seek forgiveness of sins from Him and receive such forgiveness in the name of Jesus our Saviour, and that we prove our faith by a life of love and good works. Greater works than these can never be done in us and by us, and none but these can bring joy to the heavenly Father's heart. 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 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. Grant to us good weather that our farmers may continue in their task of feeding the world.

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 (Proper 21)

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 longer. 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 say, 'The behaviour of the Lord is not fair.' Please listen, 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, 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, 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 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, 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 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.

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