

"What Do You Think?"

Matthew 21:28-32

Baxter Exum (#988)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
October 5, 2008



Introduction:

This morning I would like for us to look together at a very brief parable that was told by Jesus on the Tuesday of the week that He died on the cross. The passage is found in **Matthew 21**, and it comes in the middle of a serious confrontation that Jesus was having with the religious leaders. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1539**. In the verses leading up to this little parable, the chief priests and the elders were challenging the authority of Christ (He had been overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple), and so they asked Jesus a question (starting in **verse 23**), **"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"** You might remember that Jesus responded with a question of His own. He said, **"I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?"** At that point, the religious leaders began to reason among themselves, saying, **"If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet." And answering Jesus, they said, 'We do not know.'"** The Bible then says that Jesus responded by saying to them, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."**

The Jewish leaders, then, were caught. They refused to change their lives, and they refused even to discuss the matter with the Lord. In our own nation, we might say that the Jewish leaders basically tried to **"Plead the Fifth,"** they tried to avoid being held accountable, and yet at that point, the Lord responded with a parable, He would not let them off the hook, and the story is crystal clear. If you will, please look with me at the parable of the two sons in **Matthew 21:28-32**. **»PPT»** This is what Jesus said in response to the stubborn rebellion of the religious leaders—He said...

²⁸ "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' ²⁹ "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. ³⁰ "The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹ "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. ³² "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

It has been said that a good parable is like a window. We look through the parable, and we can see things in a different way, but then at some point we catch our own reflection in the window...and sometimes we are surprised by what we see. This morning, we notice that Jesus starts with a question. He starts in verse 28 by saying, **"But what do you think?"** Jesus was taking it directly to the religious leaders, and he wanted them to think about something, **"What do you think?"** And as we read these words nearly 2,000 years later, the question is still there. It is a parable for all of us to consider. Jesus is asking a question, and He wants us to come to a conclusion. If you will then, please think with me about what Jesus said here, and I would like for us to do so by looking at each of the three main characters.

I. And right away, we come to THE FIRST SON. **»PPT»**

We notice in verse 28 that the father comes to the first son and says, **"Son, go work today in the vineyard."** A very simple request. The father needs workers, and who should be more interested in seeing the family vineyard succeed than the sons. So, it is a very simple request. It is a request for work that needs to be done right away. The father says that the work needs to be done **"today."** And we obviously notice that **"work"** is involved. It was not going to be easy.

I do not know about all of you, but I know that I personally have never worked in a vineyard. Several years ago, we were taking Amtrak over to Boston, and in the middle of the night the train slowly rolled to a stop somewhere in northern Pennsylvania. The crew came running down the aisle to the back of the train, and in about half an hour the train started moving again, and the crew came back up the aisle, explaining that a hydraulic hose had come loose somewhere. I was just thankful that we were on a train and not an airplane. But as we sat there in the dark, we could look out the window in the moonlight, and we could see that we were in the middle of a huge vineyard, just a few miles from the shore of Lake Erie. There were grapevines as far as we could see. So although most of us have probably never actually worked in a vineyard, we can certainly imagine that it would be some pretty hard work. There would be pruning, and weeding, and fertilizing, and there would be the harvest. All of this would have been out there in the heat, and the sun, with the bugs and all of that. And yet as a father, this man had every right to ask his sons to go work today in the vineyard.

As we bring this over into modern times and as we start to try to apply this to our lives today, we also know that our heavenly Father has every right to ask us to go work in His vineyard. God has called us to a life of service and sacrifice. As Jesus said in Matthew 10:37-39, **"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it."** As my grandfather has said to me several times, **"If the Bible teaches anything, it teaches self-control."** The Christian life calls for a living sacrifice.

But back in the parable, both sons seem to understand this. They know it, they know that their father is calling for service and sacrifice, and so the first son very clearly just comes right out and says in **verse 29**, **"I will not."** Jesus went on to compare this son to the tax collectors and the prostitutes. The first son, therefore, like the tax collectors and prostitutes, was openly rebellious to his father. He came straight out and said it, **"I will not."** There is no courtesy here. There is no explanation given. He is simply disobedient to his father. Under the Law of Moses, a disobedient child could be stoned to death. So it was a very serious situation here.

But as we keep reading, we discover that the disobedient son **"regretted"** his decision and ended up going into the vineyard after all! He was like the Prodigal Son in **Luke 15**—the young man who took his part of the family inheritance and blew it in a far off land. When he ran out of money, the Bible says that he **"came to his senses"** and decided to turn around and go back home. That seems to be what happens here. He apparently thought about it for a little bit, he realized what he had done, and he had a change of heart.

And again, Jesus is talking about the tax collectors and the prostitutes. They had rebelled against God. They had basically said to God, **"We will not go into the vineyard."** And yet as bad as they were, the prostitutes and the tax collectors (like the first son) also had a change of heart. They had said "No" to God, but they turned around. In the end, many of them repented, they became obedient to the gospel message, they submitted themselves to the baptism of John, and they were adopted into the family of God. We remember that Matthew was a tax collector. It is so interesting that Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers to record this particular parable! Matthew understood that someone who says "No" to God can have a change of heart!

That was the message of John the Immerser. John preached repentance and baptism, and there was a time in **Luke 3**, when the crowds asked him what it meant to repent. The crowds wanted to know, **"Then what should we do?"** The Bible says that John, **"...would answer and say to them, 'The man who has two coats is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.' And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.' Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, 'And what about us, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.'"** Some very good advice for all of us here this morning! When we repent, we change our minds, we change the way we think about sin, and we change our behavior. If we are living together with a boyfriend or a girlfriend, we move out. If we are stealing supplies from work, we make restitution. If we are committing the sin of gossip, we stop it and we ask for forgiveness. We follow the example of the first son by changing our minds and doing what is right. Even if we start out being disrespectful and disobedient to God, God allows us to turn around. God allows us to finish well.

We can think about a man by the name of Zaccheus in the opening verses of **Luke 19**. When Jesus passed through Jericho, He met this tax collector, and after eating a meal with the Lord, Zaccheus made the decision to make a change. He promised to give half of his money to the poor, and he promised to repay four times as much to anyone he had defrauded in the past. Zaccheus understood the message of the first son. Zaccheus got it. And before He left, Jesus said, **"Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham."**

Last week in the Sunday morning adult Bible class, we learned about Moses. Moses started out by saying, **"I will not go,"** to God. But Moses had a change of heart and ended up going. And as we discussed in class, the same thing was true of the prophet Jeremiah. The same thing was true of the apostle Paul. Paul started out on the wrong side of the will of God, he started out persecuting the church, but Paul had a change of heart. Like the first son, Paul made a U-turn.

As I understand it, God respects the struggle that we go through—He knows how tough it is. When we start out by saying "No" to God, God does not give up, but He is patient with us, and he is pleading with us to have a change of heart, like the first son. As Peter writes later, in **2 Peter 3:9**, **"The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."** So first of all, then, we learn a lesson of repentance from the first son, as we discover that, **"Actions speak louder than words."** We discover that God allows us to make a U-turn.

II. But as we keep reading, we come to THE SECOND SON. »PPT»

In **verse 30**, we find that the father makes the same request of the second son, but this son responds by saying, **"I will, sir; but he did not go."** Did we notice the respect in this answer? Unlike the first son, the second son addresses his father as **"Sir."** I tried to think about it this week, but I do not think that I have ever addressed my dad as "sir." It's not that I do not respect my father, it's just that in our family we did not address our parents as "sir" or "ma'am." So the second son, therefore, was very respectful. He went even beyond what many people will do. He addressed his father as **"sir."**

Later on, Jesus identified the second son with the Pharisees and the religious leaders. They were quick to speak up. They were quick to talk a good game. They were right there at the front of the line saying "Yes" to God. They looked good on the outside. We know that God had sent the religious leaders to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. That was the purpose of the Law of Moses. The Scribes and the Pharisees should have been right there teaching the prophecies concerning Jesus from the books of Isaiah, and Amos, and Malachi. They should have seen Jesus coming. They should have been preparing the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus. By taking their positions of leadership, they were saying "Yes" to God. And yet we find in **verse 30**, that like the second son, they might have said, **"We will, sir,"** but they did not go. This was like the kid at school who was always the first to raise his hand but never came through with the right answer. With the son,

we do not know what happened. Maybe he got distracted doing something else. Maybe a good friend came by and he ended up “hanging out” instead of working in the vineyard. Maybe he just forgot. As parents, don’t we understand what’s going on here? Don’t we know how frustrating it is to have a child agree to do something and then not do it? You know, it has been said that insanity is something you inherit from your children—it is not the other way around. So here is a loving father with a son who says, **“I will, sir,”** but the son does not follow through. That can be so frustrating! On the other hand, we should also be open to the possibility that Son #2 was straight up lying. We do not know, but it is possible that he had no intention of ever working in the vineyard. It is possible that he just said, **“I will, sir,”** just to get his father to leave him alone. So it’s possible that he said “Yes,” just to get his father off his back.

But whatever the case might have been, we are reminded that talk is cheap. We can talk and talk and promise just about anything, but empty words mean nothing. It seems that politicians are always talking about reforming this or that, but it seems that nothing ever really changes—they are following in the footsteps of the second son.

James, the Lord’s half-brother, warned about this in **James 2:15-16**, ***“If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?”*** James was warning against the sin of the second son—speaking eloquent and flattering words but not following through with action, not following through with obedience.

In a similar way, the religious leaders might have said “Yes” to God, but then they got caught up in following their man-made traditions. They got distracted with making sure that they were well-fed and wealthy. They got busy making sure that they stayed in power. They got busy making sure that their tassels were just the right length, and that they did not walk more than so many yards on a Sabbath day. They had long arguments about whether someone was allowed to rescue a donkey out of a ditch on the Sabbath day. They got caught up in leading those long and eloquent prayers on the street corners in Jerusalem. And by the time Jesus showed up on the scene, they had gone from saying “Yes” to God to outright rejecting God’s message through the prophet John. They got distracted and were not doing what God had told them to do—they were not obeying the word of God.

As we think about our situation today, we need to remember that how we finish is more important than how we start. We remember that Judas started strong. Judas was so faithful at the beginning, but he ended up as a thief and a traitor who took his own life. Demas started out as Paul’s co-worker, but he ended up falling away from the faith and going back to the world. I think we might say that what happens after we are baptized is just as important as what happens when we are baptized. Saying “Yes” to God is so important, but it is also important that we follow through with obedience.

Unlike the second son, and unlike the religious leaders, the tax collectors and the prostitutes had changed—they were actually willing to do the will of God. Can we imagine someone signing up for a high school football team who goes through all of the trying out, and all of the training, and all of the practice, and then is shocked that he is expected to actually play in a game? We can hardly imagine someone going through all of that trouble and then saying, **“No, I do not want to actually play, I just signed up so I can wear those cool pants.”** In a similar way, it is not enough to just say “Yes” to God, we must also follow through.

If we say “Yes” to God and refuse to follow through, the Bible refers to that as the sin of hypocrisy—saying one thing and doing another. Several years ago, I shared a story that had been going around by e-mail. Apparently there was a man who starts getting angry at the driver in front of him at the red light. The man beats on his steering wheel, and screams obscenities at the driver in front of him, and in doing so he attracts the attention of a police officer behind him who quickly pulls him over. The man gets rather indignant at the officer and wants to know why he was pulled over, and the officer replies in this way, **“I noticed the CROSS hanging from your rear view mirror, the bright yellow CHOOSE LIFE license tag, the JESUS IS COMING SOON bumper sticker on one side and the GOD IS MY CO-PILOT sticker on the other side, plus the FISH symbol on the trunk...so I figured you must have stolen the car!”** It is not always that obvious, but there are definitely times when our words do not match our actions. The Bible refers to that as hypocrisy. That is the sin of the second son—saying one thing but doing another.

III. Before we close, though, there is another character in this parable who is often overlooked—we need to consider THE FATHER. »PPT»

Both men are referred to as **“sons”** and have a common relationship through the father. In the explanation at the end of the parable, the obvious conclusion is that the father of the two sons represents our own Father in heaven. We know, then, that the father was loving and compassionate. In the parable, we see that the father never debated or argued. The father never forced his sons to work. The father never demanded anything in a harsh or unloving manner. The request was tender, practical, and reasonable. And yet at the same time, the father asked for obedience. It was not a suggestion. The sons were not able to negotiate what they were required to do. He told his sons to go work in the vineyard, and he had every right (as a father) to make that request.

As we apply this to our own situation, we know that God wants us to be His obedient children. He wants us to be known as His sons and daughters. He loves us as a Father. He sent His own Son as a sacrifice for our sins. And yet there is a time coming when even a loving Father will hold His children accountable. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus said, **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform**

many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’”

What does it take to enter the kingdom of God? Even the hypocritical leaders realized that the first son was the one who was truly pleasing to God. In the answer, Jesus said that the tax collectors and the prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven before the hypocrites. I find it interesting that in His great mercy, the Father did not say that the hypocrites would never enter the kingdom, but He left the door open. He said that others would enter first. In other words, they could enter, but not as they were—not in their current condition. They could enter, but only after they changed their hearts and lives, which, for these people, was going to be a long, long time.

Conclusion & Invitation:

So here we are at the end, and we come back to the question that Jesus asks at the beginning, ***“What do you think?”*** Jesus tosses it right back to the listeners! The people who heard this parable for the first time are being asked to make a decision, ***“What do you think?”*** And the question reaches nearly 2,000 years into the future, because here we are this morning considering the same question. We are being called to make a decision. If we also admit that the first son is the one who really did the will of his father, then we are also admitting that God wants us to follow through with our obedience. We are admitting that we need to actually do something.

As we walk by the window of this parable, we can see ourselves in the reflection, and we understand that the parable is not really about two sons. The parable is about you and me. The parable is about two kinds of people in this life—those who claim to love God but then refuse to do anything about it, and those who mess up at first but eventually come around. The message this morning, then, is that it is not too late to make a change. It is not too late to say “Yes” to God. It is not too late to say “Yes” and really mean it. God is gently but firmly calling us into the kingdom, and the decision is totally and completely up to us.

Are we like the sixth-grader who was so nervous for her science test that she drew out a cheat-sheet on the palm of her hand, but then in a moment of repentance wiped her hand clean before the test? Or are we like the those who say “Yes” to God but then allow the smallest of excuses to keep us from doing what we know we need to do?

Thankfully, God gave us this parable not to make us feel bad, not to shame us, but to gently turn us back to Him. Has there ever been a Son to say “Yes” to the Father and then to follow through with perfect obedience? Yes, there has been such a Son! God the Father sent Jesus into the world, and Jesus obeyed. In fact, the writer of Hebrews says in **Hebrews 5:8-9**, that, ***“Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.”*** Jesus did not just say “Yes” to God, but He lived “Yes.” There was no

arguing, no complaining, only complete and total obedience. Jesus became our perfect example.

Even if we have said "No" to God in the past, the door is still open. If we are willing to turn around right now, our disobedience in the past does not matter to God, because on the Day of Judgment, God's conclusion will be that, like the first son, we were in that group who did the will of the Father.

God has offered His perfect Son as a sacrifice for our sins, and in response, God wants us to believe, He wants us to turn away from sin, He wants us to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and He wants us to live a faithful life. If you would like the help of this congregation to follow through with any of those steps, you can let us know about your request as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org