

The Two Sons
Matthew 21:28-32

When I was a senior in high school, I did something I had never done before: I auditioned for a part in my high school's all-school production. We had finished an abysmal basketball season and so I was looking for something constructive to do with my time from March to May. The all-school production was M*A*S*H (if you're too young to remember M*A*S*H, the setting was an Army hospital during the Korean War). Lo and behold, I got to play the part of Hawkeye – the goofball with lots of good lines.

The thing you realize when you audition for a part is that the plot is already set, the parts are already established, and the script is already written. What you get to do is to put yourself (your energy, your personality, your verve) into your character. Being Hawkeye was a blast because I entered into the part and made it my own.

N.T. Wright points out that the parables of Jesus function as dramatic plays in search of actors. He says that when we hear the parables of the kingdom, Jesus is inviting us to audition for parts. The parables communicate the “plot” of the kingdom of God, the different characters in the kingdom of God, and, in essence, the script we are to follow. When we hear the parables Jesus invites us to enter into the drama of the kingdom and to put ourselves fully into our “parts.”

This morning we are beginning a 6-week sermon series from Jesus' parables. We're calling this series “Glimpses of God” because these parables (like all Jesus' parables) give us glimpses of God - what God is like and how He wants to relate to us. As you know, each type of literature in the Bible works on us in different ways. Paul's letters, for example, tend to be very direct and very much to the point. But the parables tend to sneak up on us. In the parables Jesus draws us into a story and then invites us to enter into the drama of what God is doing and to put ourselves fully into our “parts.”

Today we are going to consider a very short parable found in Matthew 21:28-32 - ***the parable of “the two sons.”*** In this parable Jesus invites us to be like one of the sons He describes. Jesus tells this parable to the Jewish leaders (chief priests and elders - v. 23) who had questioned His authority. They wanted to know why Jesus thought He had the authority to clear the money-changers and merchants out of the temple (vv. 12-13), why had the authority to heal people (v. 14), and why He didn't stop the children from praising Him (v. 15). They ask Him, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” (v. 23)

Instead of telling them, “I'm the second person of the Trinity and I can do whatever I want!” Jesus asks them a question: “The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” Jesus was challenging them to state publicly what they believed about John the Baptist - that he wasn't a prophet from God but merely a man who gained a following. But that admission would have been a public relations nightmare because the people believed that John the Baptist was a prophet from God. Many,

many of the people had received and believed John's message. And so the Jewish authorities simply said, "We do not know" whether his baptism was from heaven or men. Jesus replied, "Neither will I tell you by what authority will I do these things."

And then Jesus tells this parable:

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.

The first son said he **wouldn't** go work in the vineyard, but eventually he regretted it and went and worked anyway. The second son does just the opposite:

30 "The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I *will*, sir'; but he did not go.

The second son said he **would** work, but he didn't.

31 "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." . . .

Jesus hones in on a single detail of the story: Which of the two sons actually **did** the will of his father? Jesus was getting them to agree that **doing the will of your father is more important than saying you'll do the will of your father**. When they responded, "The first," Jesus continued by revealing who the story was really about.

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.

There had to be an audible gasp when Jesus made this comment. Jesus is talking to chief priests and elders - those with the most spiritual clout and (probably) respect in the Jewish community. He tells them that tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom before them. In Jesus' day everybody thought that tax collectors and prostitutes were excluded from the kingdom, disqualified from being in God's presence and living under God's reign. People hated the way tax collectors made money: they collected taxes for the Romans who occupied Israel and collected additional money for themselves. Prostitutes. . . . well, by the way they made money, they too were at the top of everybody's list of really bad people.

Why would Jesus say that such notorious sinners would get into the kingdom of God before the Jewish authorities? Because they were just like the first son and the chief priests and elders were just like the second son:

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.

Remember that earlier in Matthew 21 Jesus had brought up John the Baptist. Here Jesus says that since John was a prophet from God, how people responded to him reveals whether they were the first son or the second son.

The Jewish authorities were publicly identified as those who were committed to the will of God. By position and by persona they were like **the second son** who said, “Yes, Father, we are will do whatever You want us to do.” But when the Father sent John the Baptist who told them to repent and live a different type of life, they wouldn’t do it. “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. . .”

The tax collectors and prostitutes, on the other hand, were publicly identified as those who didn’t much care about the will of God. By their lifestyles they were like **the first son** who said, “No, I’m not going to work in the vineyard; I’m going to do whatever I want.” But, when they heard John the Baptist declare that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand and that even they could be part of it if they repented (Matthew 3:1-6), “the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. . .” They were just like the first son who reconsidered his rejection of the father’s will. They realized that you’re heading the wrong direction, the only sane and logical thing to do is turn around and go the right direction. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed John the Baptist (and eventually Jesus) and entered the Kingdom of heaven.

How did the chief priests and elders react when they saw that the tax collectors and prostitutes believed? “. . . and you, seeing *this*, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.” Matthew uses the same term here he used in verse 29: whereas the first son “regretted” his declaration that he wouldn’t go work in the vineyard, the Jewish authorities “did **not** [regret] even feel remorse” and do differently. The point is that they too could be like the first son in Jesus’ parables; they could have regretted their lack of commitment to God’s will and done differently.

What “glimpse of God” do we get from this parable? The most basic thing we see here is that **God is a Father who expects everyone to do His will**. In the parable the father expected both sons to work in the vineyard. Jesus expected tax-collectors and prostitutes and chief priests and elders to do the will of His Father. God is **that** sovereign; God has **that** type of absolute claim on every person on earth. What is clear elsewhere in Scripture is that through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God provides a **way** for everybody to do His will. Anybody - absolutely anybody - can come into a relationship with God in which He leads and empowers them to do His will.

This hints at the “plot” of the kingdom of God. God is drawing together a body of people, a nation of people, a kingdom of people who do His will from the heart. And He invites everyone to be part this movement.

Do you realize that God expects **you** to do His will in every area of your life? This may sound extreme, but it’s implicit in everything Jesus taught. When, for example, we pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we’re expressing

this type of commitment to the will of God. Understand that the will of God isn't limiting and stifling; the will of God is expansive and liberating. God's expectation that we do His will is an expression of His love for us. Even though we don't always recognize it as such, when God demands that we do His will (in any area of life) He is drawing us into something that is far superior to anything else we might choose for ourselves.

In this parable Jesus is inviting us to be the first son - the son who actually did the will of his father. But first we need to ask ourselves the question:

How am I like the second son (who said he'd do the father's will but didn't)?

In small ways or huge ways, most of us who seek to follow Jesus are like the second son. At one time or another most of us have made bold declarations about doing God's will, but we've failed to live up to our own standards. We respond in different ways. On one end of the spectrum, some people condemn themselves as the vilest of hypocrites. On the other end of the spectrum, others shrug their shoulders and say, "Nobody's perfect." Most of us are probably somewhere in between. If we're honest, we all have to admit that there are pockets of hypocrisy in our lives.

The parable makes clear that hypocrisy doesn't disqualify a person from God's grace. Anybody can repent, taking a different direction. Jesus held out that possibility to the chief priests and elders that heard this parable. Jesus holds out that possibility to you. Can you think of an area of your life where you've vowed to do the will of God but haven't been able to do so? Thought life; parenting; discipline; anger; patience; self-control. If you've said to God, "I will do Your will" but you haven't done it, the best course of action is to repent - admit it and seek to live differently.

Jesus' conversation with the chief priests and elders holds an additional warning - especially for those of us who have been believers for a long time and who are basically "insiders" when it comes to spiritual matters and to the church. The warning is this: ***Don't be like the chief priests and elders who had a sense of entitlement*** when it came to spiritual things. They thought that because they were the religious establishment that they understood and did God's will more than anybody else. And they resented that tax collectors and prostitutes got so much love from Jesus and they resented Jesus' declaration that those who repented were in a better position with God than they were. Jesus warned against these very attitudes when He described the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. The elder brother was the responsible, respectable one who resented that the younger brother was welcomed back without consequences.

Sometimes those who've been in a church for a long time have this same sense of entitlement. And sometimes they resent those who are analogous to the tax-collectors and prostitutes: those who come from backgrounds and lifestyles that you've always critiqued (and maybe even feared). I'm not saying this is a huge problem here at Faith; but this is a warning for us. Or maybe you're the type of person who remembers everything (and who holds grudges); you have a hard time overlooking others' past sins and hypocrisy. This parable challenges you to realize that God is a Father who wants

everybody to do His will. He is ultimately concerned that people experience Him and His grace to the point where we actually do His will.

In what ways do I need to be like the first son (regretting that he rejected the father's will and doing differently)?

It's possible that by your words and by your life you've said to God in a rather comprehensive sense, "Thanks but no thanks. I will not follow You. I will not do Your will." This opposition to God and His will may actually be part of your identity; like the tax gatherers and prostitutes in Jesus' day, you may be known for your opposition to God and Jesus and church and the Bible. Jesus says to you today, there's a place in the Kingdom for you anyway. Jesus died for people just like you. Jesus died for people who hated God and said to Him, "No, I will not do Your will."

Like the first son, you first need to "regret" that attitude and then accept Jesus' payment for your sin. It's never too late. Never.

Or maybe you're a follower of Jesus, but there's still an area of your life in which you've basically said, "I'll never be obedient here. In this area I will never do God's will." Maybe you say this because you don't think obedience is possible when it comes to your anger or your lust or your gossip. You know yourself so well that you honestly don't think you can ever be obedient.

Or maybe you don't really believe that obedience is good for you in some area of your life. Maybe the issue for you is forgiveness. Maybe somebody has hurt you so deeply that you've said, "I can never forgive that person." You need to allow God to melt away the bitterness and the anger so that you can forgive the other person.

If God reigns in your life, you can be the first son. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I can be the first son who actually does the will of the Father. You and I can pursue obedience in every single area of our lives.

The invitation is to enter into this part fully and make it your own. Instead of merely thinking, "I won't be quite so self-centered and selfish," we can be people who love others fervently from the heart! Instead of trying not to be quite so sensual, what about pursuing a life of purity from the heart! Instead of trying not to worry quite so much, what about being people of great faith - showing up in the way we pray and the way we act! In the kingdom of God, Jesus is inviting us to put our personality, our energy, our history into a life of obedience.