

The parable of the brothers * Matthew 21:28-32
October 22, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I want you to picture two people.

One of them looks like, oh, I don't know, JFK. He's handsome, he's well-kept, he's the kind of guy you'd want to take home to your grandma. He's well-respected in the community, he gives to charity, he goes to church every Sunday and even helps do the dishes after potluck dinners. He's the epitome of a 'good man.'

But, to be honest, he kind of thinks this God thing is silly. He's a 'God helps those who help themselves kind of guy.' And he helps himself. He is doing fine all on his own, thank you very much. And even though he goes to church every Sunday, he doesn't really allow God to have any actual say in his life.

The other man, well, he looks kind of like Dog the Bounty Hunter. Do you know Dog the Bounty Hunter? Kind of like Hulk Hogan but shorter and less muscular? This guy looks like that. He's lived a rough life. He's done things that would make your grandma blush and he's been pretty unrepentant about it.

Until he hit rock bottom. For the first time in his life, he saw things how they really are. And when he heard Jesus calling, he decided that if Jesus could embrace someone like him, then this Jesus is someone worth following.

Which one of these men is most likely to enter the Kingdom of God? The epitome of a good man who thinks religion is a crutch? Or the lifelong sinner who thinks that Jesus is a lifeline?

I think the world around us might say the JFK type. They'd certainly respect him more than the Dog the Bounty Hunter type.

But is that how it works in the Kingdom of God? Let's go to God's Word to find out.

Today we're going to Matthew 21:28-32. Matthew 21:28-32.

Here's the parable:

28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

29 " 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

Now this is not one of Jesus' most familiar parables – it only appears here in Matthew's Gospel – so let's take a minute to think about how it works in the world of the parable.

So there is a man and he has two sons. He also has a small vineyard – not large enough that he'd have servants working it – just the kind of small family farm where the sons do the work.

And one day there was work to be done and so the father went to the first son and said 'Son, go and work in the vineyard.'

The son said 'I WILL NOT.'

Now, did you ever have your mom and dad ever tell you to do something and you said 'no'? How did that go for you?

I remember once I was probably Ben's age or younger, they were putting a new roof on our garage at home. And I wandered down to the garage to help out and found a broom and started sweeping up. I thought I was being helpful. The lead carpenter said 'quit doing that, that's woman's work.' So I quit doing it. Later that week, my mom asked me to sweep the floor so I said 'no, that's woman's work.' I swept the floor.

If that's how we understand that now, imagine how it played in the Ancient Near East. This son's refusal to do the will of the father was shocking and outright disrespectful. Sons do what their parents tell them to do! And so when the son said 'No,' he wasn't just saying 'I don't want to do the work,' he was also saying 'I don't want you telling me to do. You will have no authority over me.'

And yet, later on, he changed his mind. He went to work in the vineyard. We don't know why, but within the world of the parable, the son changed his mind and decided that the father's will was good and he did it.

In the meantime, the father went to the other son and said 'Son, go and work in the vineyard.'

Now *this* son responded the way you were *supposed* to respond in this culture. Look at what he says – verse 30 – 'I will, sir.' Not only does he agree to go and do what has been asked of him, he does it with an air of deference and respect. 'I will, sir.' He is SO respectful. This is a 'good' son!

And yet, did he ever make it to the vineyard? In the end, he did not go. His words expressed respect; his actions expressed rejection.

So, what do you think? Which of the two did what the father wanted? The rebellious son who went to the vineyard? Or the respectful son who never did?

The rebellious son. The first one. At first, he refused to do the father's will, but in the end, he changed his mind and went to work.

Now, before we bring this parable in our own world, we need to talk about it in Jesus' world, because Jesus spoke this parable into a very specific situation.

You can see in verse 23 and onwards that Jesus was in the middle of talking to the religious leaders of the day. They had come to put Him on the hot seat but Jesus just turned the heat back on them instead. He says essentially 'John came (John the Baptist) came from God and yet you – the supposedly most godly leaders of the day – refused to listen to him. Why do you refuse to listen to the Father?' They hum and haw in verse 25 because they don't want to look bad in front of the people.

And so, Jesus drops this parable on them.

Let's read it again because it's short:

28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

29 " 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

Who do you think this son is? It's the religious leaders! It's the scribes and the Pharisees and the people who go to great lengths to demonstrate their piety and their religiosity. They are meticulous in their ritual practise and they say 'We think you are the greatest Father, sir we will do your will' and yet do they? They refuse His authority.

Verse 31 - "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" Well, what do you think?

"The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Tax collectors and prostitutes were 'the worst of the worst' when it came to sinners in the ancient Jewish worldview yet what does Jesus say here? They're like the first son who started off by rejecting the father but in the end came to do what the father wanted. The people whom the Pharisees despise as sinners are actually the ones who are willing to embrace God's authority to do the Father's will!

And what's the Father's will? The Father's will is that all people turn from rejecting Him to rely on Him and to ACTIVELY follow Jesus. That's verse 32 – John came to reveal the way of righteousness – ie., to turn to sin and to get on board with what Jesus was doing.

And the unbelievable irony here is that the least 'godly people' got it and the most 'godly' didn't. The worst of the worst of sinners did the will of the Father – they embraced Jesus and His message - the supposedly pious and religious people didn't!

This parable is frankly an indictment of anyone who claims to know God and yet has no interest in actually walking with God. In Jesus' day, this was the Pharisees and religious leaders; in our day, this is the kind of person who is coasting by on religious tradition rather than actively engaging with God in the everyday details of life.

You know this person. Maybe you are this person: the kind of person who goes to church every week but never really listens to God through the week. The kind of person who never makes an effort to hear from God in prayer, or by reading their Bible for themselves. They only pray when they want something from God. They think of church as a social institution or a manmade construct and think that as long as they get their religious and ethical ducks in a row, they'll be all good.

To quote Isaiah 'They honour me their lips and yet their hearts are far from me' (Isaiah 29:13, Matthew 15:8).

Instead, Jesus says, enough with the empty church-going and superficial ethics; the will of the Father is that you walk with Me, that you take My yoke upon you and learn from Me for My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30). That you go where I go and do as I would. That's what the tax collectors and sinners were doing; they were actively turning from sin to follow Jesus and applying His grace in all parts of their lives. And even when the 'religious elite' saw it, they *still* didn't turn to walk with God!

Which leads me to my big idea for today:

Better a sinner who walks with Jesus than a religious person who doesn't.

That's what this parable is all about: better to be a sinner who walks with Jesus than a religious person who won't.

Because a sinful person who's walking with Jesus is humble enough and honest enough to know how much they need God. They recognize the depth of their sin, which makes God's grace all the more amazing. They are not going to settle for religious rituals to keep them going; they want nothing less than to walk with the creating, redeeming, sustaining God day by day. They know that even though their past may be dark, their present and future with Jesus are eternally bright.

And I suppose that if I wanted to be more accurate, I'd say 'better a repentant sinner' who walks with Jesus; but let's be honest: you don't stop being a sinner when you turn to follow Jesus. Frankly, the more grow in the faith, the more aware I am of my own sinfulness.

But you know what? If you are a sinner walking with Jesus, you are becoming less and less a sinner every day. And you are growing more and more into the likeness of the One that you follow day by day.

Better to be a sinner who walks with Jesus than a religious person who doesn't.

Because frankly, that religious way is a dead end street. Literally. There is no life to be had in empty religious acts, in shutting God out from having any meaningful influence in your life. Just because you say 'I will, SIR,' doesn't mean you're doing the will of God.

To quote 1 John 2:4-6:

4 The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him:

6 Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

And what's the best way to walk as Jesus did? To walk with Jesus every day.

Better a sinner who walks with Jesus than a religious person who doesn't.

Now I mentioned earlier that this is not a well-known parable because it only appears here in Matthew. I got thinking this week – why? Why is Matthew the only Gospel writer who told us this parable?

You know why? Matthew was the first son. He was literally a tax collector. Matthew 9:9, Matthew was sitting in his tax collecting booth, overcharging people on their taxes and fleecing them for all they were worth, to enrich himself, to help to fund the hostile occupation of Judea by Rome – he's a tax collector AND a traitor – and Jesus comes along and says 'follow me.' He refused the will of God at first but came around to do the will of the Father in the end. 'It's never too late to enter the Kingdom.'

And when he did, he discovered meaning and purpose and value that went WAY beyond anything the religious people were experiencing and he knew and appreciated the value of walking with God. He put this parable in so that we would know firsthand from his experience how much better it is to walk with Jesus than to be religious and alone.

I like the note in the 'Apply the Word' study Bible here:

Jesus [is] a friend of sinners who welcomed people who knew they needed forgiveness (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:36–50). His words show that people do not have to become good before

they meet God. He responds to faith no matter how troubled our past. Then He guides us as we establish a new life.

If you are like the first son in the parable, it's never too late and it doesn't matter what you've done. Jesus invites you into a new life, turning from sin to follow Him. And if you're the second son, Jesus calls you too, to go beyond the religious trappings of Christianity and to discover the Christ for yourself.

Better a sinner who walks with Jesus than a religious person who doesn't.

Let's go back to our question that we opened with. Remember? JFK and Dog the Bounty Hunter? Which one of them is most likely to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

Well, given the bounty hunter's willingness to turn from sin and walk with Jesus, the answer's him; the repentant sinner is most likely to enter the Kingdom.

But I have to admit, that this is kind of a trick question, because even though the JFK type is just as much a sinner as the bounty hunter, he is just as welcome in the Kingdom of God if he realizes his need for God and chooses to follow Jesus. Eternity is going to be a wild place for all those who walk with Jesus, regardless of where they've been.

Better a sinner who walks with Jesus than a religious person who doesn't.

Prayer:

Who am I? A religious person? A sinner who walks with Jesus?

BENEDICTION

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 - Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.