

Sermon for October 19, 2014 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21:28–32 (NIV84)

Theme: **“Lord, help me be the child you want me to be.”**

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?’ ‘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.*

Introduction

What kind of child of God are you?

Are you the one who rebelliously says, “I will not”, only later to regret it and repent? Or are you the child who says, “I will” only to neglect doing what you promised? Neither one of these choices are “ideal” are they?

Parents: would you be totally happy with your child if he acted like either one of the two sons Jesus mentioned in our text? If not, then how can God be totally happy with us? If we are honest with ourselves - we often act a little like both sons, don't we?

With Jesus as our guide, let us learn to heartily confess our sins and failures, and be led to pray: **“Lord, help me be the child you want me to be.”** 1) *A child who is willing to repent.* 2) *And a child who does your will.*

Part One: A child who is willing to repent.

What do you think? Jesus originally posed this question to some chief priest and elders at the temple in Jerusalem who (in unbelief) challenged Jesus' authority. His purpose in speaking this parable was to get these leaders to consider their situation, realize their unbelief and move them to repent.

There was a man who had two sons. The man represents God and the two sons represent two classes of Jews - who were both God's children according to his Old Testament covenant.

He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' The father is not asking anything hard or unexpected of his son. He is simply asking him to show his love by obeying his will. This represents God's call to all of his children to do his will out of love for him. And what exactly is the work God has planned for us? On an earlier occasion, Jesus himself said: *The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.* (John 6:29, NIV84)

Faith exhibiting itself in obedient love - this is all that God has ever wanted from us. And knowing how weak we are, knowing that we (because of our sinful nature) don't even have the power to desire salvation from him, God has even sent His Holy Spirit with his word to create the faith he desires in our heart. Sadly, however, mankind still has the power to reject the work of the Holy Spirit - as we see in the response of the first son, who told his Father:

I will not. Jesus tells us that this first son - with his obstinate and rebellious response - represents the tax collectors and prostitutes of his day: in other words gross sinners, who may have initially laughed off God's call to repent and believe, or simply disregarded it for a time, not wanting to give up living in their sins.

Sadly, we also have been rebellious like this first son, haven't we? There may have been a certain pet sin of ours that we didn't want to give up. When someone lovingly pointed it out - calling for us to repent and leave our sin behind - our thoughts defiantly cried out, "I will not." I will not stop living together with my boy or girl friend. I will not stop drinking as much alcohol as I do, even though it is hurting the people around me. I will not stop gossiping. I will not stop teasing my coworker who gets angry so easily. I will not make an effort to come to church more often. I will not stop coveting those luxuries I desire, etc ... For this rebellion we deserve more than just a good grounding or spanking. We deserve God's eternal punishment in hell.

But, we read regarding this rebellious son that *later he changed his mind and went* and did his Father's will.

This represents the tax collectors and prostitutes who - even though they had rejected calls to repentance in the past - were cut to the heart at John the Baptist's preaching. They believed his message, repented of their sins and looked to the coming Messiah for the forgiveness of their sins. As fruits of their repentance, they left behind their sinful life, and pursued learning all they could about the coming Messiah. They treasured the Gospel, and it showed in their coming to hear John's preaching, their kind actions towards each other and their desire to share the good news of Christ.

And God does the same for us, doesn't he? In love, God continues to both call us to repentance and remind us of the forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross. Just as the Father's love led the first son to change his mind (that is: just as the Father's love led the tax collectors and prostitutes

to repent) so the Father's same love for us leads us to repent of our sins and look to Jesus alone for forgiveness and salvation.

And this is why we pray, "Lord, help me be the child you want me to be: a child who is willing to repent. I thank you for your patience, forgiveness and love. Lead me, by the power of your Spirit, to always be in a state of repentance: always turning to you in love and faith. I can only do it with your help. O Holy Spirit, help me be a child who does your will."

Part Two: A child who does your will.

Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir.' This second son represents the chief priests and elders of Israel who, when they read about the coming Messiah in Scripture, promised that they would believe in and obey the Messiah wholeheartedly.

Sadly, Jesus says that *this son did not go* to do his Father's will. This represents the fact that, even though Judah's religious elite promised to believe in the Messiah, they, in fact, utterly rejected him. They were unwilling to believe the testimony of John the Baptist, when he called them to repent. They were unwilling to marvel and praise God for his work of bringing rebellious sinners like the tax collectors and prostitutes to repentance and faith. They were unwilling to let their heavenly Father's love move them to believe in His Son like they promised they would.

This is why Jesus tells them this scathing truth: *the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you*. In other words, "The people you condemn as the worst sinners in the world, whom you thought could never really make it to heaven because of their sins; you, with your show of religiosity, are worse than they! They repented at the preaching of John the Baptist and are therefore forgiven. You, however, have not repented, and this is why you remain outside the kingdom of God, while they are coming in.

Thankfully none of us are like these chief priests and Jewish leaders, right? Well, while it is true that we don't outwardly reject Jesus as the Messiah as they did, I do think we often act like this son in that we promise to do the will of our Father, only later not to do it.

Just think of the many confirmation students over the years who have stood before this altar - promising to be faithful to Christ, even to the point of death, only to stop coming to Church shortly after making that promise. Are they not in danger of becoming the son who made the promise but did not fulfill his father's will?

But they aren't the only ones. We all need to take a hard look at ourselves and the promises we made in our hearts to God - only to have broken them. "Lord, I will help the person who needs help. Lord, I will come to church more regularly. Lord, I will stop lusting over that person or object. Lord, I will be content with what you give me etc..." only to have not kept our promises. And I don't just mean accidentally messing up either, I mean how many times haven't we willfully done the opposite of the good we said we would do? Sadly, too many times, right?

So where does that leave us? It should leave us at the foot of the cross, asking the LORD to forgive us. And when we turn to him in repentance and faith, he shows himself willing to forgive us.

This is exactly what Jesus did with the chief priests and elders of the people. Notice that he didn't close heaven to them, but Jesus said: "*I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you*". By saying this, he was both pointing out their sin and inviting them to repent and believe - so they too might join the former tax collectors and prostitutes in being citizens of Christ's eternal kingdom.

The Lord holds the door open for us as well. He calls us to repent and trust in him, both for the forgiveness of our sins and also for help to be the children he wants us to be - children who do his will.

And how exactly does the LORD help us? He sends us the Holy Spirit through His Word, who creates in our heart a desire to do his will. This desire comes from the good news of Jesus (our almighty God) taking on human flesh and blood in order to suffer and die for our sins. This message of Christ's selfless work for us, changes our attitudes. It makes us thankful. It makes us want to live as the children God declared us to be in baptism. And, having created this desire to thank God for his wonderful gift of salvation, the Holy Spirit then uses His Law to show us how we can express our gratitude with our childlike obedience: both avoiding the evil God wants us to avoid, and doing the good He wants us to do.

It is true: because of our sinful nature, we will never be perfect in this life. But, because of Jesus, we will always be forgiven. This truth will move us to strive forward in our faith to be the children he wants us to be: Children who are always willing to repent, and children who (in the peace of Christ forgiveness) willingly obey His will. Amen.