

The Parables
Matthew 21:18-32
(Parable of The Two Sons)
“It’s Not About The Promises You Make, But the Ones You Keep”

Introduction

The week final week of Jesus’ life when he came into the city of Jerusalem was a pivotal moment in all of history. He was The Lamb of God come to be a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The Law of Moses specified that on the tenth day of the month on Nissan the passover lambs were to be brought into the homes of the Jews for inspection and were kept in the house until the fourteenth day of Nissan when they would be slaughtered for the Passover. Jesus came into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week, to be “inspected” by the religious leaders just as all the other passover lambs were. The Pharisees tried with all their might to disqualify Christ as He stood before them, but He was and always shall be The Spotless Lamb of God!

Upon entering the city, The Lord sees a fig tree with green leaves. Fig trees actually begin to bud with figs before the leaves appear. This tree that was so full of leaves should have had some fruit as well. But, when Jesus and his disciples come close to inspect the tree, they find that while it has plenty of leaves, it is completely devoid of fruit. Jesus curses the tree (**vs.19**). While Matthew records the story of the fig tree in a single telling without giving us a specific time frame, the Gospel of Mark actually explains that it was the the next morning, when they passed by the tree again and the disciples noticed that it had withered and died. Jesus explains to them that if they learn to pray in faith, they too will be able to accomplish such miraculous things (**vs. 21-22**). But, we are left with the question; Why did Jesus curse the tree? Was He angry because it had no fruit? Did he not know, being God, that the tree had no fruit before He inspected it? Of course He knew! He didn’t curse the tree in anger. He did it to prove a point. The tree was a symbolic picture of The Nation of Israel. Though the spiritual leaders (Pharisees) of the people there had the appearance of being “religious” and Godly, there was nothing genuine about their faith. They were leafy trees without fruit. Though they looked really spiritual on the outside, there was nothing to them. They were “fruitless” Hypocrites. And as such, they proved themselves unworthy of the blessings of God. The Son of God would therefore remove His blessings from them and give them to someone more deserving. He had come to bless those who would believe His message and respond in true repentance to find mercy and forgiveness.

Upon coming to the Temple, He began to teach. The Pharisees, who no doubt were still really angered by His purging of the moneychangers a day earlier (**vs. 12-13**), approach him to ask who gave him the authority to teach in The Temple. Think of the irony of their question. The Temple was built to be “The House of God” and of prayer (**Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13**), and yet, these blind Pharisees were actually questioning God’s right to be there! Jesus responds by asking them where John The Baptist received his authority to preach repentance and baptism. The Pharisees found themselves caught on the horns of a dilemma, for although they had rejected the teachings of John, they knew him to be quite popular with the common people, who had come in droves to be baptized by him. To keep from causing a riot, the Pharisees tell Jesus that they “do not know” where John’s authority came from. Therefore, Jesus refuses to answer their question regarding His own authority, but rather, tells them a story that should have cut them to the heart. It is a story of Two Sons: one of whom does the will of his father and another who does not. When we closely examine the parable, we see A Father’s PLEA, A Son’s PROCRASTINATION, and yet another Son’s PERJURY.

The Father’s PLEA

I grew up on a farm. To work the fields was never really optional for me and my brothers. When our dad said “hoe the garden” or “feed the cattle”, then that is exactly what we did. To delay, or even worse disobey, brought swift consequences down upon us. We knew better than to ignore a request made by our father. When you really think about it, it would have been incredibly rude for us to do anything other than help him out. After all, he was the one who was providing for us. He gave us a roof over our heads, food to eat, and pretty much everything else that we required to survive. He never asked us to do more than we could, he just wanted us to do our share and maybe even learn a little something about how to provide for our own families when the time came.

God The Father had purposefully chosen The Nation of Israel. His intent was for them to be a light for all the world so that others would know of His love and forgiveness. Israel is often referred to as a vine in scripture, planted and tended by God himself to bear fruit to the nations (**Isaiah 5:1-5; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15:1-8**). Unfortunately, the nation had only produced “sour grapes” and never had become what the Lord had intended. They had been given the Law of Moses, so that they could live in God’s favor, and by doing so, cause the nations around them to long for His blessings as well. They had instead, because of their sinfulness and pride, become a stumbling block for the nations. By the time that Jesus came to walk this earth, the Law of Moses was used to tear people down rather than build them up. The religious leaders of the Jewish people were more about exclusion than inclusion. John the Baptist was sent to call the outcast back to repentance, so that those who had been excluded could repent and find forgiveness. This great “revival” was done in preparation of the coming of The Son of God, who would bring a New Covenant through His death upon the cross. The Pharisees had rejected John’s warning to repent, but to those who had been so severely ostracized by the Pharisees, John’s call to repentance was like an oasis in the desert. They ran to him, so desperate was their need to be right with God. They longed for what the strict rules of the Pharisees could never give them: Forgiveness and acceptance. Their response to John’s message had brought them to the humility that would be necessary to obtain the grace and mercy that would soon be offered to them from Calvary’s Cross.

The Father had called all of the “Sons of Israel” to go out and bear fruit in the vineyard, but sadly, only part of them heeded his earnest plea. There were two types of “Sons”; the rebellious and the righteous. The Pharisees, who thought that they had done enough to earn the favor of God, and the sinners, who were willing to humble themselves and gladly work in the vineyard, are represented by the two sons of the parable. The Father had shared His earnest plea with them equally. Both gave a response. The fact is that accepting the message of the gospel is not about the promises that you make, but rather it is about the promises that you keep. One son refused, but then repented and obeyed, while the other son accepted the invitation with his words, but never actually went out into the vineyard.

The First Son’s PROCRASTINATION

Although we are not specifically told why the first son refused to go out and work the vineyard, those of us who grew up on a farm can readily explain his refusal. Farm work is HARD work! I always dreaded my father mentioning all the things that needed to be done in my daily chores. I would, quite honestly, have rather been doing something else, ANYTHING ELSE, than go out on a hot summer day and work in the cornfield. I would rather have been out in the woods with my trusty BB-gun, or sitting in my room reading my comic books, than tending the livestock or putting up hay. It’s just a fact. However, none of those things had any lasting value. My father knew that winter was coming, and if the work wasn’t done, then we would find ourselves in a real predicament with nothing to eat. The work needed to be done while there was still time, or in the vernacular of us country folk, we needed to “make hay while the sun was shining”. Working the fields for the sake of the gospel is no different. We must never forget that night is coming. God will soon bring judgment upon this wicked world, and we must do all that we can, not only to make ourselves ready, but to help others make ready as well. We must repent of our sin and go out into the “vineyard” and work. It’s fruit-bearing season, and we have been called to bear fruit (**John 15**).

Many people today are just like the sinners of Jesus’ day. They are not interested in repentance, or being reconciled to God. They believe that they have better things to do. They are misled into believing that their sinful lives can bring them pleasure and satisfaction. However, this is only a wicked lie, for the wages of sin is death (**Romans 6:23**). Sin never satisfies, but people are afraid of giving it up for the righteousness that God offers. Many in Israel responded to the preaching of John, because they had come to realize that what they thought was living was in fact getting them no where. They were willing trade their sin for something of far greater worth. They, like the first son in the story, had at first refused The Father’s plea, but later they had seen the error of their ways and repented. They readily rushed out into the vineyard to be about the work of The Father who had given them so much. They, according to Jesus, were prostitutes and tax collectors (**vs.32**), who had seen the folly of refusing God’s favor and turned back to him in repentance. These same people were hanging on Jesus’ every word, while the Pharisees were mocking Him. They had started off reusing the father, but in the end, they had

chosen to obey. It's not about the promises that you make, but rather about the ones you keep that matters. They had refused to work in the vineyard, but realized their mistake and corrected it. They were the most despised in all of Israel, and yet, here they stood righteous before God!

The Final Son's PERJURY

The second son was long on promises, but short on follow through. Simply put, he overpromised, but underdelivered. I guess he thought that his father wouldn't notice that although he had promised to work the vineyard, he actually never left the house. The Pharisees, thought that they had perfectly obeyed every command that The LORD had ever given. Therefore, they had sneered at the preaching of John that spoke of their need for repentance. No need to repent, if you haven't done anything wrong... right? They actually believed themselves to be SINLESS. John had repeatedly tried to warn them. He had even called them a **"brood of vipers"** (**Luke 3:17**), but I guess they thought he must have been referring to someone else. Satan appeared in the Garden of Eden in the form of a serpent (**Genesis 3**), so how much more demonic can a group of people be when they are likened to a "brood of vipers". The religious leaders in Jesus time were so impressed with themselves that they didn't see the need to heed God's call to repentance. They were like the second son who professed his love for the father with his lips, but refused to go into the vineyard. Their whole "outward appearance of religion" was just a lie. Though they claimed to belong to The Father, the Love of The Father was not in them (**1 John 2:15-16**). They were so prideful in their own "goodness" that they had missed the point. That point being,

"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

(Romans 3:10-12)

Everyone MUST heed the plea of The Father to repent and go out into the vineyard. To refuse is to be lost and undone with our God. Many people come to church every Sunday. They claim to love Christ with all their hearts. They sing the songs of faith, and even try to live a good moral life. But sadly, they are lacking in the one thing that they need the most. They are disobedient to the commands of The Father. He has called us to repent of our sins and to go and make disciples. We prove that we love Jesus, by living according to His commandments (**John 14:15**).

Many people within the church today think that they are ok, because one day they walked down the isle of the church and prayed a prayer asking for forgiveness. They may have done this as an emotional response to a sermon, or because they felt pressure to do so. They may have "prayed the right words", but in truth, they just got up from their knees and went back to living just as they always had been. The second son in the parable SAID the right thing, but he never followed through with his promise. He, in spite of all his good words, was still a disobedient child.

When I married Sandi, I stood at the altar in front of a preacher and promised to "love, honor, and cherish..." (you all know the drill), but what if, at the end of the ceremony, I had just gotten in my car and driven away, leaving Sandi standing there at the altar? What if she never even saw me again after that day? Would we truly be married? After all, we said the right words, isn't that enough? Did I really have to let her come and LIVE with me? Short answer, you bet I did! It's not really a marriage, if you don't LIVE like you are married! It's the same with Christ. If you really meant that prayer that you prayed, then you will get up from your knees and LIVE like you meant it. It's not about the promises that you make, its about the ones that you keep that prove that you are married to Christ. Or, as His little brother James would say, **"Faith, by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."** (**James 2:17**).

Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "Preacher, are you saying that I could lose my salvation?" NO, I am not. I'm saying that if you have not been changed on the inside, because of your faith in Jesus, then you never HAD salvation to begin with. **"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"** (**2 Corinthians 5:17**). True repentance will leave you forever changed. If you have been truly saved, then you will LONG to "work in the vineyard", or in this case, obey the commands of Christ. It's not the promises you make. It's about the ones that you keep! Obedience to Christ is the proof that you are His. Don't be like the self-righteous Pharisees, who

convinced themselves that they were doing just fine in God's sight. Humble yourself before The LORD and let Him lift you up. Answer His call to repentance.

In my twenty five years of ministry, I've never really had much of a problem with so called "sinners". I have learned over the years, that lost people ACT like lost people. So, I do my best to love them and point them to Christ and His amazing love and grace. Would you like to know who I've had problems with? "Church folks", who thought that they were somehow superior to the sinners, that's who. The Pharisees in Jesus day are a whole lot like some of the people that I have encountered in the church over the years. They prayed a prayer once, and got dunked in the baptistry, but they were never actually "baptized into Christ" (**Romans 6:3-4**). They put on a great religious show (aided by comparing themselves to others who don't do as well as them), but they are devoid of love for others. It almost seems like the more they can keep others out, the more that they can put on display just how "spiritual" that they are. Sadly, they are only fooling themselves. True followers of Christ will long to "work in the vineyard". They want to stay connected to The True Vine and produce fruit (**John 15**). They want to see others brought in, rather than kept out. Ask yourself these simple questions this morning: Have I truly repented of my sins and obeyed the Father's command to go out into the vineyard? Or, did I just promise that I would go, but never did a thing to prove it? Which of these two sons best describes my heart this morning? Faith without works is dead. Obey the call of Christ. Surrender yourself to His will and go out and make a difference in the "vineyard". He is coming back later to check our work. I want to be ready. How about you? It's not about the promises that you make, but about the promises that you KEEP!

And ALL of GOD's people said... TRUTH!!!