

Parable of Two Sons
Matthew 21: 28-32
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This is the first of three parables in which Jesus rebukes the Jewish leaders for their obstinacy and hardness of heart. In the Parable of Two Sons, [Matthew 21:29-32] Jesus rebukes the leaders of the day for their failure to acknowledge or believe that the message of John the Baptist concerning repentance from dead works and preparation of the way for the Messiah were from God. In the Parable of the Landowner, [Matthew 21: 33-46] Jesus compares them to the builders who rejected the very stone spoken of in Psalm 118—a distinctly messianic psalm, recited or sung as part of the Passover Hallel. This stone, symbolic of our Lord Jesus Christ, became the chief cornerstone. In the Parable of the Wedding Feast [Matthew 22: 1-14] He compares them to the unworthy invited guests who make specious excuses for not coming to the wedding feast when invited, some even killing the king’s servants who conveyed the invitation (speaking of the prophets sent to the nation of Israel.)

Central Message in the Parable of Two Sons

The central message of the Parable of Two Sons may be summarized in a little phrase which I once found written on the back of an envelope I received, “Only what you do, do you believe.” Talk is cheap. In the end, actions matter more than words and are the only reliable standard for obedience. Saying “I will obey You, Lord,” and actually acting in obedience are two different things.



The religious leaders of the time were notorious for giving lip-service to God, but not obedience. Of course, condemning them for this shortcoming (indeed a serious one) is easy to do. There is certainly no shortage of people willing to point out the faults of both Pharisees and Sadducees. Their censure as a group is richly deserved and entirely earned.¹ But how are we doing in this very area? What do our actions reveal about what we really believe? [Illustration: Pharisees.]

Isaiah speaks of a people who worship with their lips but their hearts are far from God. In Isa 29:13-14 we find the very phrase “lip service.”

Because this people draw near with their words
And honor Me with their lip service,
But they remove their hearts far from Me,
And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote,
Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people,
wondrously marvelous;

¹ We should remember that not all Pharisees were among those Jesus condemned. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were both Pharisees.

And the wisdom of their wise men will perish,
And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed." ²



The Proverbs compare a person with a wicked heart who has a tongue that is on fire for God, to an earthen ware pot with a silver overlay.

Like an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross
Are burning lips and a wicked heart.
Proverbs 26:23

In our day there is no shortage of preachers, elders, deacons, leaders and people in each church who proclaim the ways of the Lord with great fervency of speech but they have eyes full of adultery and hearts full of all manner of wickedness. These men and women whose actions and works stand in contrast with their speech are the same as those Jesus

condemns in this parable. [Photo: Silver and tin plated earthenware, London c.1600. Careful examination of the pot reveals a deep crack in the surface. A person whose tongue is full of burning passion for God, but who harbors wickedness his heart is like this silver coated earthenware vessel. The Parable of Two Sons addresses the problem of saying “yes, yes” with the lips but “no, no” with our actions.]

In the epistles, words not commensurate with our actions are likewise condemned. Perhaps the most well-known reference is in the Book of James, chapter 1: 22-25. Here we find that a man who hears the word but does not do it is deluded. Blessing in all we do is tied directly to our obedience, not just our hearing of the “law of liberty.”

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

Background

Here then is the background and setting for the Parable of Two Sons:

Jesus made four journeys to Jerusalem, one as a lad of 12 years, and the other three during His ministry years. On His first visit during Passover of ~AD 27, He cleansed the temple as described in John 2: 14-22. The disciples remembered that it was written “Zeal for Your house will consume Me.” He had a remarkable conversation with Nicodemus during this visit where

² All Bible references are to the New American Standard Updated version, the Lockman Foundation.

He told him (and therefore us), that unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. [Illustration: Jesus cleansing the Temple.]

It was on His second visit, during the Feast of Tabernacles (~AD 29), that Jesus stood on the last day of this feast and cried out,



If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, “From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.” But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

John 7:37-39.

The Chief Priests sent officers of the temple police to arrest Jesus then and there, but they returned empty handed. “Why did you not bring Him?” they asked. The officers answered, “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks”

John 7: 45-46.

That brings us to the third visit which was during Passover ~AD30. This time Jesus makes His last visit to Jerusalem where He will voluntarily surrender His life so that we might live. As He entered the city the crowds shouted out “Hosanna to the Son David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (See Matthew 21:1-11).

He entered the temple courts and began teaching, just as He had done on His previous visits to Jerusalem. But this time the chief priests and the elders of the people seemed better prepared to oppose Him. They asked:

“By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” Jesus said to them, “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?” And they began reasoning 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.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” Matthew 21: 23-27.

The Parable Explored

Immediately following that acerbic confrontation which ended in a stalemate, Jesus revealed their hearts to them by telling the Parable of Two Sons. Here is the parable, which appears only in Matthew 21:28-32”

“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.’ “And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went. The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I will, sir’; but he did not go. 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. 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.”

The shock value of what Jesus said to the Pharisees can only be appreciated when we remember that the tax collectors were held in complete and utter contempt by the people as traitors to their nation, profiting by exploiting their own people for personal gain. They were regarded as the lowest of the low, perhaps even lower than prostitutes.



Are we modern Pharisees?

In order to answer the question we must understand that the Pharisees had a long tradition of being set apart for God. Their name, “Pharashim,” meant the “holy ones,” or “set apart ones.” They went to all kinds of extremes to keep the law, creating a complex system of rules and regulations which sometimes set aside even the Law of God. For example, declaring an asset “corban,” that is

“set aside for God,” was employed by these people to avoid giving financial aid to needy elderly parents. See Mark 7:11.

Pharisees were known for their duplicity. For example, they proceed with legal notices to evict widows from their homes while making long prayers in public (Matthew 23:14). Jesus pronounced eight woes on the scribes and Pharisees, referring to them as hypocrites (the root of the word means, “actors”).

We might look at them and say, “Yikes! I’m not that bad.” I’ve never evicted a widow. I tithe, I show up for work-parties at church; I fast, I pray, I memorize scripture. All these traits, favorable as they may be, are part of what makes up the observable, exterior man. But Jesus is after the heart of the man, as is noted in Matthew’s Gospel:

So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men,
but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
Matthew 23:28

What is on the inside?

The question then is this: “what is on the inside?” Do you look good on the inside, where only God sees? Do we say “yes, Lord” with burning lips to the first and greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” but then on the inside we entertain thoughts of hatred, bitterness, (murder), lust (adultery) and desire for wealth and riches (coveteousness)? Can we read the Word of God with stentorian tones but stumble over the very syllables we read? Do we have a secret desire to be wealthy but read without the slightest comprehension, “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction”? (1 Timothy 6:9).

By citing John’s teaching Jesus refers us back to the question He asked the Pharisees and scribes when they questioned His authority. “The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?”

John’s preaching was pointing the way to the Kingdom of Heaven:

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Matthew 11:12-15



His preaching was taking hold; his voice, proclaiming the uncomfortable truth throughout the Judean wilderness, was being heard by the common man even Jerusalem. And even in the palace of King Herod his words received attention. Sinners were entering the kingdom, as Jesus notes in this parable.

But the Pharisees and chief priests did not believe John’s witness, even after they saw for themselves many of the most vile and defiled sinners repenting of sin and entering into the kingdom by believing what John said, namely that the Messiah was coming. [Illustration: John the Baptist imprisoned by King Herod.]

Who was John?

John was referred to as “The Baptist” or “The Baptizer” (Mark 6:14; Matthew 3:1). The Gospel writers add “Baptist” To differentiate him from others by the same name of John, and to highlight his distinctive role in baptizing unto repentance. Because of John, baptism became the central rite of repentance for Christians, and remains so even today.

When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John. Luke 7: 29-30

The birth of John the Baptist to his elderly parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth (Mary's cousin), heralded the rebirth of prophecy and ends the so-called 600 "silent years." His mission was clear from the beginning: He was to make the people ready for the messiah. (Luke 1: 5-25, 57-66, 67-80.)

John is noted for his early recognition that Jesus was indeed the Christ, though later in his ministry, while imprisoned by Herod, he had some doubts.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" John 1:24-36

Thus, John was the forerunner of Christ (Mark 1:2). He linked the old era and the new. He stands before the Cross as the greatest of all under the old covenant.

Everything about John calls to mind the figure of Elijah the prophet. John is the prophet's prophet, from his mantle, his wild appearance, his residence in the wilderness, and above all his bold proclamation of the truth to all comers. Like Jesus, he rejected "official Jerusalem" and the high priests and the religious/political parties of his day.

But the people flocked to hear John. His prophetic message cut no corners, spared no person or party—told the truth as it was. Consider the account from the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke:

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
“MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS
PATHS STRAIGHT. EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED,
AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT
LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND
THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; AND ALL FLESH WILL
SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.”

So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds were questioning him, saying, “Then what shall we do?” And he would answer and say to them, “The man who has two tunics 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.”

Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison. Luke 3:1-20

By highlighting John's message, Jesus made it clear to everyone that the Pharisees had rejected the clear call that John issued, and had thus rejected God's plan of salvation.

Two kinds of people:

Thus the parable describes two kinds of people: The first sort of person is like the first son who said, "I will not;" but afterward he regretted it and went to work. These are those who say "No, I won't do what God says," but after saying so, they obey Him anyway, and sometimes gladly.

The second sort of person is like the second son who said, "I will sir," but he did not go. These are the Pharisees and those also of our day who boldly declare for everyone to hear, "I'll obey God," but they do not.

How would we answer Jesus' question?

"Which of the two did the will of his father?" He asked them. They correctly answer, "The first." Even for the Pharisees it was not difficult to discern that obedience means doing and not just talk. We are not exempt from answering Jesus' question—He still poses it to us today, "Which of the two did the will of his father." The only reasonable answer is that the person who does the Father's will, not just says he will do the Father's will, is the true and obedient son.

Which description of these two sons looks the most like us?