

The main point of Jesus' parable from our Gospel reading today seems easy enough to figure out. You might express it with the familiar saying, "Actions speak louder than words." Those who have been parents can probably think back to a time when a child acted like one of these two sons. When moms ask for the kids' bedroom to be picked up and cleaned, the initial response might be a sour comment about being too busy, yet the job eventually gets done. On the other hand sometimes the initial reaction to the request is quite agreeable, but the work never gets accomplished. Which of the two did what the mom wanted? As in the parable, the answer is obvious. Results are what counts.

However, don't think for a second that you have this parable all figured out, that you can daydream for the rest of the sermon. There is more to grasp here than is apparent at first hearing. Like all of Jesus' parables, this is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus is teaching great spiritual and eternal truths, not just rules for daily living. Understanding the context and to whom Jesus addresses this story will help you to pick up the deeper meaning of this text.

Last week the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard taught that God's ways and wages are based on grace not fairness. Those who have spent a long time working in the kingdom as believers should not grumble that latecomers get the same pay of eternal life. Such grumbling endangers faith and salvation. Today's parable also involves work in the vineyard. But the setting has changed. Jesus has made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is now Tuesday of Holy Week, the last full working day of our Lord's ministry, perhaps the busiest day of His life. He was teaching in the temple courts, and the confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders had reached an explosive level. They were trying to trap Jesus so they could falsely accuse Him of blasphemy and have Him killed. Into this atmosphere of hatred Jesus directs one last warning and call for repentance. For them and for us He echoes the plea from our OT reading, "*Repent and turn from all your transgression, lest iniquity be your ruin...so turn, and live.*"

We need to identify some elements of the parable in order to make it clear. The man who had two sons is God. The vineyard was one of several terms for God's kingdom. Isaiah 5:1-7 is a Song of the Vineyard, a passage very familiar to the religious leaders. It states clearly, "*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel.*" To make application for all time, the vineyard is the true church on earth, all active believers in Jesus. Thus to work in the vineyard is to become a child of God by faith in the Redeemer. This parable is about way more than picking grapes!

The first work God wants from you is faith. After feeding the 5000 Jesus was asked this question by a skeptical crowd, "*What must we do to do the works God requires?*" Jesus answered, "*The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent.*" When the jailer in Philippi pleaded with Paul, "*What must I do to be saved?*" the simple answer was, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.*" The work is actually God working faith in the workers and they then producing the fruits of faith. The two sons represent two kinds of people in Israel. The point must be stressed that, despite appearances, both are equally sinful. The first son is rebellious and rude. His answer, "I will not," shows great disrespect for his father. He didn't care what his father or anyone else thought. With him, what you see is what you get, but what you saw wasn't too pleasant. In Jesus' application we learn that he represents the tax collector and prostitutes, blatant gross sinners whom respectable people despised.

The other son was quite the opposite. His answer was careful and polite, almost to a fault. Saying "I go, sir," instead of "sure, dad," makes you suspicious that something is not right. He was very concerned about the appearance of being respectable and religious. However, behind that outward show was the reality of hypocrisy. The Pharisees and other religious leaders knew that this son represented them.

Again, remember that both sons were sinful. The drastic difference comes in how they handle that sin. The first son changed his mind. He went to work. When the despised sinners heard John the Baptist preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, they repented. They believed the promise and turned around. Their lives changed. But

the Pharisees and religious elite of that time had no use for John the Baptist. They did not believe him; they rejected his message because they were mistakenly secure in their outward display of goodness.

We should understand that the message of John the Baptist and the message of Jesus were identical. Both proclaimed repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So to reject one was to reject the other. To believe one was to believe the other. John pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus was the coming Savior whose way John prepared. John came to show the way of righteousness and Jesus was that way. His perfect life, and the sacrifice of that life on the cross to pay for sin, opened the door to the kingdom of heaven. After forcing the listeners to admit that the first son did what the father wanted, Jesus issued a strong warning to them: *"Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom of heaven before you."* The door was still open, but their lack of faith, their refusal to believe in Him, meant that they weren't going in. Real repentance and faith in Christ belong inseparably together.

Now we move on to application. How does this parable apply to you? Which son are you? Honestly, I don't know. Only you and God know for sure what's inside your heart. But let's talk about what can be said with some certainty. It's fairly likely that on the level of outward appearance others generally think of us as decent and respectable, not like the first son or the gross sinners. But sadly, we are too much like the second son. Our follow through is lacking. Our Father in heaven has asked all of us to do some hard things. He has asked us to be holy in an unholy world. He has asked us to reflect the image of His Son to everyone we meet. And brimming with good intentions we say, "Yes, Father, I'll do as you ask." But five minutes after walking out of church, we've already broken our promises to God. Husbands and wives are nagging each other, parents are yelling at uncooperative kids, thoughts are turning to everything that's wrong in the world. And during the week, we miss opportunities to speak with others about the blessing of life in Jesus because we are too preoccupied with things we've got to get done, or because the inspiration of this hour has quickly faded. We know what's right in God's eyes, but we end up doing the exact opposite. The words, *"the soul who sins shall die,"* make us uneasy, or worse. If it's left up to us, God's work won't get done.

But there is another Son who is part of the story. God the Father spoke to His Son and said, "Son, I love you. But I need you to go and work today. I need you to go to earth, take on flesh and blood, and live with sinful people. I need you to heal, preach, and teach. I need you to suffer and die in their place. Will you do this?" Jesus looked at His Father and said, "Yes, Father, I will do it." And He did. Even though the work was hard, He never changed His mind. Even though He struggled and prayed in the Garden for relief, He followed through. He was *obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Because Jesus completed His work, our sins and shortcomings are covered. Now all of us, regardless of our level of respectability, can together confess our sins and in faith receive God's promise of forgiveness in Christ. Inwardly we are to be like the first son: sorry for our sin and eager for God's help. Once we have received forgiveness, the previous outward condition really doesn't matter. That is left behind and now we want to go out and work in the vineyard. Our lives have new direction.

The following story illustrates how with forgiveness, God also gives us a new identity. Two brothers were found guilty of stealing sheep. In that time and country, the punishment they received was to have their foreheads branded with the letters, S & T, standing for "Sheep Thief." The first brother was so embarrassed and bitter that he fled to another country. He nursed the resentment the rest of his life and died there, buried in a forgotten grave. His brother however, repented of his crime and decided not to leave home. He thought, "I can't run away from the fact that I stole sheep. I'll stay here and hopefully someday I will win back the respect of my neighbors." As the years passed he did establish a reputation for honesty and integrity. One day a stranger came into town and saw the brand on his forehead. He asked one of the local people what it stood for. After thinking for a while, the man answered, "It all happened so long ago, I can't remember the details. But I think the letters are the abbreviation for Saint."

That brother had changed and gone to work. First comes repentance and faith, then follows the willing service of thanksgiving. The first work of believing always leads to the responding work of serving.

What will that work of service look like? From the parable we know that lip service is not adequate. It is not sufficient to just say, "I will." Following through is what God wants. Actions do speak louder than words. They show what's in our hearts. The service will be directed toward others. The Epistle reading provided this guidance: *"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."*

By coming to worship you are demonstrating to others that you love the Lord Jesus and care about your fellow members. By working together in activities here at church, by encouraging others in difficult times, by reflecting Christ's love in all you do, by managing all your life for God's purposes, you are serving in His kingdom.

The work of service is not always going to be easy. We are called to do what our Heavenly Father wants. Often that will be the exact opposite of the direction urged by the media and popular culture. We may have to run against the wind or swim against the current. Proverbs 31:8 says, *"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves."* Our difficult work of service is to speak the truth regarding the sacredness and value of all human life in a world that hears so many lies repeated so often.

We won't ever serve perfectly. Based on our record, we will always be a mixture of the two sons. Promising, falling short, repenting, and then going out to serve. By God's grace and forgiveness our identity is changed. Instead of our sorry record, God looks at Jesus' record of perfect righteousness. In Christ we are forgiven sinners and true saints of God. With the strength God provides we become more and more like His Son. The results come closer to our intentions and promises. Then when our service here is completed, by God's grace we will enter the heavenly kingdom and on bended knee bow before the exalted Jesus, confessing that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Until then, we serve gladly and thankfully as forgiven workers in His kingdom. Amen.