

Two Sons

Matthew 21:28-32

There is so much to be gained from the study of the life of David, and one of the primary events that stands out is when the Lord himself chose David to be king over Israel. After the disastrous reign of King Saul, the Lord promised that he himself would provide a king from the sons of Jesse the Bethlehemite. Before that King was identified, the prophet Samuel would rightly rebuke King Saul for his flagrant disobedience,

1 Sam. 15:22 “So Samuel said: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king.”

As Saul resisted that prophetic judgment of God, he seized the edge of Samuel’s robe as he was leaving and tore it, to which Samuel replied,

1 Sam. 15:28. “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. 29 And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.”

Thus Samuel went to Bethlehem at the Lord’s command in order to anoint the next king from among the sons of Jesse

1 Sam. 16:2 “Take a heifer with you, and say, I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ 3 Then invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; you shall anoint for Me the one I name to you.”

The obvious thought was that that promise would refer to

Jesse’s oldest son, Eliab. But that is not what God had determined. It wouldn’t be any of the first 7 of Jesse’s sons who would become king—it was the 8th son, the youngest, whom God had chosen. David, the one keeping the sheep. Thus we read,

1 Sam. 16:6 “So it was, when they came, that he looked at Eliab and said, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before Him!” 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

There is the main point of the whole situation. There is the timeless application of how God looks upon mankind, those creatures whom he created in his own image. Those words stand out with such great impact and relevance. “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” If only we would always remember that, and always live and act accordingly.

Those words apply so directly to our text this afternoon, in this parable of the two sons. The parable is so simple, so straightforward, and so personally penetrating for all of us, but especially so for those whom he was teaching this last week of his life as a man on earth. I really don’t need to explain the meaning of the parable so that you understand what Jesus is teaching. That is made so abundantly obvious by the parable itself. But our focus this afternoon, and the abiding benefit of this parable for us is to recognize just how thoroughly and comprehensively it applies to all of our lives, all of the time. And again, I’ll start with those words regarding the selection of David as king. “The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

So,

v.28 “...what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came

to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' 29 He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first."

That was pretty obvious, of course, and that was the power of the parable itself. No other answer was possible. Remembering what we read last week in verse 23, that Jesus is speaking to the chief priests and the elders of the people as they were confronting him about his teaching, Jesus is able to use this simple parable to compel those chief priest and elders to condemn themselves. They were challenging his authority, as we studied last week, challenging his right to speak with authority and to exercise power, and Jesus exposes them for all the sinful wickedness and rebellion. They obviously could not give any other answer to Jesus with regard to this parable.

The point to be made is very simple, and that is to identify and emphasize,

I. THE DEMONSTRATION OF REPENTANCE.

That is the difference that Jesus emphasizes between these two sons. The focus is not upon their initial behavior, but instead, their subsequent behavior. That makes all the difference in the world, for the first son demonstrates what is common to all men in all time, every descendant of Adam and Eve by natural generation. Namely sin. Disobedience. Rejection. Rebellion. Stubborn resistance to the will of God. "A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' He answered and said, 'I will not,'"

That response is called sin, just as it was for Adam and Eve.

Gen. 2:16 "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying,

"Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

You know how that went.

Gen. 3:6 "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate."

That's called sin. And because Adam was the federal, covenant head of the whole human race, we learn later in the Bible that all mankind sinned in Adam and fell with him. We read about that in Romans 5, where Paul makes the contrast with those who sinned in Adam and those who are made righteous in Christ. Here are the words that describe the fall of man in Adam:

Rom. 5:12 "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

Rom. 5:15 "For if by the one man's offense many died..."

Rom. 5:16 "For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation..."

Rom. 5:17 "For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one..."

Rom. 5:18 "Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation..."

Rom. 5:19 "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners..."

So all mankind sinned in Adam, and

A. The evidence of sin in fallen man is rebellion against God.

In our parable today, "A man had two sons, and he came to

the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' 29 He answered and said, 'I will not.'

But then what? What did this sinful, rebellious son do? In a word, he repented. He turned away from his sin. And we read very simply, "...but afterward he regretted it and went." That's repentance.

B. The nature of repentance is to turn away from sin toward obedient submission to God.

So he went! He changed his mind, more importantly, he changed his behavior, his actions. And for that he is praised as the one who "did the will of his father." He didn't do it initially, but he regretted that. That's the word for repentance. That's what repentance is—it is a change of life brought about by a change of heart. It is bringing an end to the stubborn rebellion of disobedience and bringing forth godly submission as the fruit of a lively faith.

The point to be made is that this first son does not hide his previous sinfulness. He doesn't have to pretend it doesn't exist. He doesn't try to make up for it or atone for it. He just changes course, he turns away from that prior sin. The apostle Paul gives us a very helpful description of what that repentance looks like. He calls it godly sorrow.

2 Cor. 7:8 "For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. 9 Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you,

what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter."

Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation! In other words, without repentance, there is no salvation. Without the commitment to turn from sin, there is no salvation. Without the godly sorrow of repentance, there is no faith. But with that godly sorrow, with that repentance, salvation is real. So real that Paul would say of himself late in his life,

1 Tim. 1:12 "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, 13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life."

With his own humility thus expressed, he would also say to the Corinthians,

1 Cor. 6:9 "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

Such were some of you! And the difference, the difference

between heaven and hell, is repentance. Most all of us, to one degree or another, can identify with this first son. ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not.’ So what matters before God is not what we were, when we were dead in sin and rebellion against God. What matters is the demonstration of the godly sorrow of repentance.

Which brings us to the second son, and with him,

II. THE DANGER OF HYPOCRISY.

You see, in the parable, this son agreed to do what his father asked. Outwardly, at least, he obeyed.

v.30 “Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir.’”

That sentence continues, though. “And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go.”

He said he would go. He didn’t rebel against the command or the request of his father. He agreed to it. With his words! But not with his actions. And there, of course, is the problem. It is what is so frequently labelled simply hypocrisy. Saying one thing but doing another.

Jesus would reserve his strongest criticism and condemnation for those he would identify as hypocrites. The words are strong and pointed.

Mat. 15:7 “Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 8 ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. 9 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

Mat. 23:25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

For the second son in our parable, this hypocrisy is in the form of superficial obedience. Superficial, meaning merely outward and external. And it is of no value before God.

A. Superficial obedience is of no value before God.

That’s the point of the parable. The first son couldn’t hide his rebellious disobedience, but the point of the parable is that he turned away from that rebellion and with his actions, obeyed. The second son professed outward obedience and submission and then refused to act upon it. Such,

B. Superficial obedience is no obedience at all.

So the penetrating statement of the parable,

v.31 “Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said to Him, “The first.”

So it is not the pretense of obedience that matters before God. It is not the words of obedience that matter before God. It is not the outward show that matters. Rather, it is the heart that matters before God. Specifically, the broken heart of the godly sorrow of repentance. “The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

Let me finish this parable with Jesus' own explanation and application, which I believe can be rightly described as,

III. THE RESULT OF CONVERSION.

Jesus didn't leave this parable without a conclusion. He used the parable in order to teach the chief priests and the elders of the people what salvation was all about. Of course, he teaches us the same thing in our day. The point is not that we need to obey God, but rather than we need to turn away from our sin. The point is "that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God." Or as Paul put it about those in Corinth who had previously sinned so grievously,

1 Cor. 6: 11 "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

Such were some of you! That's the description of a true Christian, one who manifests the result of conversion, one who has been changed! And there were no worse examples in his day that Jesus could have mentioned than "tax collectors and harlots." And that's the point. God saves sinners! Even the harlots, the prostitutes. Even the crooked and wicked tax collectors. God saves adulterers. God saves drunkards. And swindlers and thieves. And with a true sense of humility, we should all be able to say, in praise to God, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."

Remember the lesson of,

Mat. 9:9 "As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him. 10 Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. 11 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His

disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

That's the result of conversion. God calls sinners to repentance. And with the plain conclusion of this parable, we see that,

A. Faith produces true obedience.

Jesus speaks rebuke to the hypocrites, but expresses the positive influence of the gospel upon those who have true faith, the faith expressed by the tax collectors and harlots, those who believed in Jesus as they repented of their sin.

v.32

It is not enough to say the right words. It is not enough to offer a mere superficial obedience to God. Those whom Jesus commends, those to whom he opens the doors of heaven are those sinners who relent, who repent, who regret and hate their sin. And with that godly sorrow, believe in Jesus.

B. Only those who turn away from their wickedness will enter the kingdom of God.

v.31 Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him."

There is both a great warning in that, and a great encouragement. The warning is plain. Produce fruit in keeping

with repentance. Turn away from your sin with godly sorrow, knowing that the Lord looks at your heart and takes delight in a broken and contrite heart. The warning is to those who try to hide their sin from God, who think themselves good, not needing a physician.

The encouragement, of course, is simple. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” And those sinners who turn from their sin with faith in what Jesus Christ has done for them on the cross, those sinners, no matter what the sin, those sinners shall enter the kingdom of God.