

Life-Giving Lessons: Kids Will Be Kids
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Matthew 21:23-32, OT Duet. 6
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²³When Jesus returned to the Temple and began teaching, the leading priests and elders came up to him. They demanded, "By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right?"

²⁴"I'll tell you by what authority I do these things if you answer one question," Jesus replied. ²⁵"Did John's authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human?"

They talked it over among themselves. "If we say it was from heaven, he will ask us why we didn't believe John. ²⁶But if we say it was merely human, we'll be mobbed because the people believe John was a prophet." ²⁷So they finally replied, "We don't know."

And Jesus responded, "Then I won't tell you by what authority I do these things."

Parable of the Two Sons

²⁸"But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹The son answered, 'No, I won't go,' but later he changed his mind and went anyway. ³⁰Then the father told the other son, 'You go,' and he said, 'Yes, sir, I will.' But he didn't go.

³¹"Which of the two obeyed his father?"

They replied, "The first."^(h)

Then Jesus explained his meaning: "I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. ³²For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn't believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did believe. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to believe him and repent of your sins.

Today's parable is about two kids; hearts and minds, words and deeds.

It reminds me of one of our sons' favorite stories when they were youngsters. It is by Richard Scarrey, and it also is about a family with two "sons", brothers, Pig Will and Pig Won't. I'm going to read a bit of it and I'll need your help (One side; "I will", the other "I won't".) [Read.]

[Summary: Pig Will is cooperative and always says "I will" whenever asked to do something, whereas Pig Won't never obeys and always responds "I won't" when asked to do something. He has poor manners and few friends. One day the pigs are sent outside to play but it rains. Pig Will puts on his coat and boots. While Pig Won't does the same, he takes them off at his first opportunity. He catches cold. The next day is Pig Will's birthday party.

Pig Won't has to stay in bed. Even though he does not deserve it (this is grace, by the way) Lowly Worm takes him a piece of cake along with his cough syrup. He tells him that if he is nice, he will have more friends. The next day he feels better. After thinking about it, Pig Won't makes a choice. He decides that he will try to be good, and use good manners. Now when his parents ask for help, Pig Will says "I will" and Pig Won't says "Me too"! From then on he is known as Pig Me Too. And everybody likes him!

Jesus told a very similar story.

He draws a sharp contrast between the two brothers, and the two groups of people. First we have the Scribes and Pharisees—the good church going folks—like us. The second group are those obvious sinners—the sex workers and the crooked IRS agents. Jesus draws some parallels between these two groups and the two brothers.

First, in understanding a parable we want to consider: What are the variables and what are the constants? In this parable (retold only in Matthew's gospel) the Father, the vineyard and the father's question "Will you go work in the vineyard?" remain constant. The variables are the two sons. Each one is portrayed as having a fault, and that is where the story turns.

The first son/daughter argues with the parent: "No way, I am tired of working in the stupid vineyard. I'd like to do a few things I like for a change." This one's problem is that s/he's is too quick to defy the will of the parent. But given some time, s/he changes his/her mind. S/He does in fact, go to the vineyard.

The second son/daughter says what s/he thinks the parent wants to hear: "Yes, Sir/Ma'am! Right away. Such a great idea, I can think of nothing I'd rather do than spend the day slaving away in the vineyard. I can't wait to get started. And while I'm at it, working up a sweat, I expect to eat second helpings at dinner tonight."

S/he sounds great; expressing good but insincere intentions. S/he says what the parent wants to hear, but s/he does not go to the vineyard.

In either case, to refuse a father's request in this culture was immensely disrespectful. Saying "no" to a parent was like a slap in the face...it is a worse offense than not doing what the father asked. **Both** children need a change of heart/mind/attitude!

Child No. 1 – has a good argument with the parent—they connect through conflict. This one is head-strong, opinionated, defiant. !) (Perhaps you know this kid? He is the typical "strong willed child" But given some time, this one has a change of heart/mind, does the will of the parent, and ultimately goes to work in the vineyard.

Child No. 2 – does not really engage with the parent, "blows him off", says one thing, but does another. Nor does he repent or change his mind, nor does this one end up in the vineyard.

Jesus' Jewish hearers would immediately equate the vineyard is as a symbol of Israel, fulfilled. For Jesus, the vineyard is the Kingdom of God.

Child No. 2 said all the right things—but did not end up in the vineyard/Kingdom. That is tragic. But that is the result of his choices.

So what is the life-giving lesson of the parable?

Jesus makes it clear in the question he asks: "Which one did the will of the father?" **The focus of the parable is doing the will of God.** And what is the will of God? **It is that we believe in God.** Jesus emphasizes this in his statements which follow the parable, repeating the word "believe" three times. (Remember: pay attention, repetition means something is important!)

"I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. ³²For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn't *believe* him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did *believe*. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to *believe* him and repent of your sins."

Perhaps this is why one commentator said that this parable is a warning to all good, church-going folks, pastors, elders and deacons: We talk the talk.

Jesus warns elsewhere (in Matthew 7:21): "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. **Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.**

We are good at saying what the Father wants to hear. But how good are we at believing and living and doing the Father's will? It is one thing to "talk the talk" but quite another to "walk the walk"! That is where the rubber hits the road. That is what matters.

In this parable we see a connection between word and deed. Belief or faith involves not merely intellectual ascent, good theology, but acting or living out what we say we believe.

Faith is not only hearing God's word, but doing it. It is one thing to say "I love you"; ("Show me!") It is another to live and behave in loving ways. Jesus himself had integrity of word and action: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son..."

"It is better to finally believe what at first you could not say, than to say at first what you do not believe." (Earl Palmer)

Jesus understood human nature. He is not surprised by our reticence to obey immediately and unquestioningly. He is not surprised by the reaction of either of these sons. Jesus understands that it is human to struggle with the Father's will, and to surrender our own wills. Struggling with belief can lead in fact, to a change of mind and heart. That is the biblical definition of repentance: It is not so much feeling sorrow for one's sin, as much as it involves changing one's mind, experiencing a turnaround, doing a 180.

The difference between repentance and believing is simply that repentance stresses the turn away from the old self-centered life, and believing stresses the turn to the new Christ-centered life.

Perhaps my favorite part of the parable is this--the Father is willing to wait for the children to change their minds, because given time, the Gospel makes sense.. The Father is so patient, so loving.

We are told in 2 Peter 3:9 (NIV)

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise [to return], as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Jesus is confronting or being confronted by the good pastors and elders who were questioning Jesus' authority. *They were quite certain they knew they were assured of a place in the Kingdom of God, and they were equally certain that the tax collectors and prostitutes had no place near the Kingdom of God.*

What is the difference? Jesus says the last group believed the word of God spoken through John the Baptist and through Jesus himself. The others were just going through the motions. Their hearts were not in it! They lack a relationship with the Living God!

Honestly? The truth is that at times we are like both of these groups

both of these "kids"/adult children,

yes, we can be like both "Pig Will" and "Pig Won't"!

The Apostle Paul described the struggle this way in Romans 7:15f:

¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

The Good news of the Gospel is that God is patient while the Holy Spirit does the inner work of changing hearts and minds (so that Pig Won't becomes Pig Me Too!); the Holy Spirit is in the business of transformation, empowering us to move from self-centered lives, to Christ-centered lives, focused on doing the will of the Father.

There is help and there is hope. The patient, loving Father waits...!

Which child are you?

Let us pray: