

**Parables of Jesus//Portraits of the Kingdom
Part Two – The Parable of the Two Sons**

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By Frederick Kruger**

Matthew 21:28-32

Background

The question Jesus asks here is being asked to the chief priests and the elders of the people. These were the religious leaders of the day and included the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

They were seen as the people that were following the Law to the letter and it was their goal to try and make sure that the people would follow the Law. They put heavy loads on the people that they seldom followed themselves but often missed the point entirely - focusing on the outward show, but not a heart for what God really wanted.

Jesus had many confrontations with them, and this episode was one of them. This parable took place during Holy Week after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the Temple and prior to His trial and crucifixion. The parable is in response to the passage we read in Matthew 21:23-27.

In the parable of the two sons, we have the father who is asking his sons to go work in his vineyard. The father in this story is God. The vineyard in the story is a metaphor for the nation of Israel and, as we'll see, it can be applied by extension to the church today. The metaphor of God's people as a "vineyard" that needs care and tending is a common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are some themes similar to what the prophet Isaiah described in Isaiah 5:1-7.

Listen to how God describes His vineyard in verses 1 and 2.

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. – Isaiah 5:1

He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. – Isaiah 5:2

We see that God the Father loves and cares for His people and church. He is asking His children to go and work in the vineyard - to care well for his people. Jesus is using this to address the way the religious leaders of his day were failing in this sense. They talked a good talk about how they were doing what God wanted, meanwhile, they were self-serving. They were using their religious practice to care only for their own interests. And Jesus is calling them out. And this does apply today as well. He's asking us to live in a way that cares about God and his people.

Then we have the *Two Sons*. The parable spends time describing them and that is important for us today.

The *first son* in the story are those people that heard the call of God and initially rejected it. But then they heard the message of John the Baptist and repented of their sins. That would be similar to people today that reject or don't acknowledge God, but then repent and get into a relationship with him through trust in Jesus.

The *second son* in the story are the chief priests and the elders of the day or the religious establishment. They would be the people that had a lot of knowledge about God and the Law. They likely followed much of it, but for the purpose of outward show, not a heart that was really in tune with God or to discern how God was working through his Son, Jesus.

They would be similar to people today that profess a faith and very likely are quite knowledgeable, but no signs that they are living a life that reflects that faith. They know how to say the right words, but when it comes to really caring for people - for doing what God has asked of them...not so much.

As we can see in the story, the father values the *actions*, or the *fruits*, of his sons more than their words. The second son was very quick to call his father "sir" and mentioned that he would do what he was asked, but never actually did the work.

1. There is "work" to be done

There is "work" to be done. As Jesus puts it, the Father in this story has asked his sons to go to work in the vineyard. So, in God's kingdom there is good work to be done – of all sorts.

Remember – caring for God's people was what 'tending the vineyard' meant to the Israelite people. And it was particularly the task of the religious leaders to make sure God's people were well cared for.

So, Jesus' parable is directed particularly at the religious leaders of his day and points out how they were failing in their task of caring well for God's people. They talked a big game, but at the end of the day they were not actually doing what God wanted from them. They weren't caring well for God's people.

But this does have implications for us today as well. This call to care for the community of God is still our calling as the church today – but it applies even more broadly than just pastors or church leaders. We, as the whole community, are called to the good work of tending the vineyard – of caring for each other well. Of ensuring that those who are struggling are supported.

Now of course, we need to remember that accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour or "Salvation", is a gift or grace. It is not something that we can earn as Jesus paid the price in full already.

Salvation is a rebirth into a new life from our old selves into the new beings that God has created us to be already. It is like a seed being planted into a real life that will continue to grow. That seed is being planted in each unique individual with our own gifts and experiences, our cultural background and socioeconomic positions. It is a gift that we receive and not anything that we can earn ourselves.

And when we receive this gift, it begins to change our hearts so that we want to do what God has asked us – much like the first son, the one representing the tax collectors and prostitutes. Those who did end up following through on what the Father wanted in the story.

But salvation is more than just an event, it is a whole new life. **Dallas Willard** said **“Salvation is not an event — it is a *life*. It is not just forgiveness and a “ticket to heaven” — it is an interactive life with God, participating *now*”**

Salvation is something that *has* happened, *is* still happening and *will* one day fully be realized at the return of Jesus.

Dallas Willard again said the following,

“We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.”

2. What “work” do we need to do?

The first question in the **Westminster Shorter Catechism** published in 1647 reads as follows,

Q. What is the chief end of humanity?

A. Humanity’s chief end is to

- 1. Glorify God, and to**
- 2. Enjoy him forever.**

This statement about our purpose being to *‘glorify God and enjoy him forever’* is something that is widely accepted in the Christian church and certainly affirmed here at Summit Drive Church.

Dr. Dennis Hollinger explains some of the tensions in this question and answer.

Enjoyers of God are those who focus primarily on all the good things that flow from our faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. The enjoyment of God includes the benefits that accrue from salvation by God’s grace: forgiveness of sin, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, hope of eternal life, personal meaning, and empowerment for daily living.

They tend to talk frequently of how God answers their prayers and meets their personal needs, whether they be spiritual, economic, physical, emotional, or relational. God is always there doing great things for the enjoyers of Christian faith.

When this outlook goes wrong, it can often lead to a sense of entitlement. God is supposed to give us all the good things and if not, we will try to snatch what is already freely given for our own benefit. This will have links in the extreme to the Prosperity Gospel which is unfortunately alive and well in our culture. On the other hand, we have the glorifiers.

Glorifiers are the believers who talk of a deep, sincere, uncompromising commitment to Christ. Following Jesus in life means giving up comfort and ease for the sake of God's kingdom. Glorifiers focus on responsibilities we have as Christ's disciples, not all the good things that come our way due to our faith. They remind us that we are called to a life of worship and spiritual disciplines. We have a responsibility to share the gospel of Christ with others, seek justice and mercy within our world, and attempt to influence the culture as salt and light.

When this outlook goes wrong, it will often lead to shame. Glorifiers will often believe that they did not glorify God enough and that they have to work harder to earn God's love and favour.

Psalm 67 helps to ease some of this tension. Our enjoyment of God actually brings worship and glory to our maker and redeemer.

The psalmist certainly wants to enjoy the blessings of God. They are wonderful gifts that remind us that God is a self-giving God of grace and mercy. We follow a God who wants the very best for us in life and desires that we experience joy, peace, hope, meaning, and a sense of divine presence and power within. But it is equally clear that we cannot stop there, for the enjoyment of God is not for our own self-centeredness.

It is true enjoyment, but never narcissistic. It is true pleasure, but never pleasure as an end in itself apart from a wider context, purpose, and meaning.

The enjoyment of God always has a larger vision in mind: That God's purposes on earth be fulfilled and that God's name be honored and praised. In other words, the enjoyment of God and the glory of God can never be pulled apart. They walk hand in hand.

How does this parable speak to that? It seems that the son who represented the religious leaders of Jesus' day – they seem to be the sort that know how to talk the good talk, but don't really have a heart for glorifying God, or enjoying him. They were going through the motions of what they thought were glorifying God but were not sincere.

It seems the *first son* – who changed his mind and got to work – this shows us the type of person who has had a transformative work in their heart. This son seems to want to love and serve his Father – to enjoy and glorify Him.

So, are there ways that we can approach our faith that don't put "enjoying" against "glorifying"? A way that truly honors Jesus as we enjoy the blessings of being his people. How would we get deeper inside of

that kind of life? To become more and more the sort of people who really “want what God wants for us” and, like the first son, get on with the work God has given us with joy and purpose?

Here’s one way to look at it - and something I’ve been leaning into more and more over the past few years. Sometimes these are called “Spiritual formation practices” or “Spiritual habits,” but these are essentially ways of bringing our lives before the Living God. Sometimes we can see them as a kind of “chore” or something to just “check off of a to-do list”, but they are so much more than that. They are gifts that we have been given that help us to lean into God in a more meaningful way. So, how do we think about these?

3. “How” and “Why” of Spiritual Practices

In the parable, we can see that the second son, or the religious leaders of the day, were very good at following the “How” of worship. They were good at doing the spiritual formation practices of their day and were able to follow it in the finest detail. They made for themselves and others a very heavy yoke that was severely deficient in the joy that God wants for us. They missed the Joy that was right in front of their eyes. They were very Religious.

What was the joy? The Person of Jesus! That the God they claimed to love and follow and serve so diligently was standing right in front of them – offering life, healing, hope – and offering it to anyone who would be willing to open themselves to God’s grace. And that was a problem for these religious leaders. Jesus was upsetting the system they had created to support their own self-serving ends.

He was demonstrating how God’s grace was available to those the religious leaders had written off – and warned the religious leaders that they were themselves out of sync with God’s ways.

In the parable we see that the first son represents those that come to Jesus, confessing their sins and getting into a relationship with the living God.

The key – the thing they had that the religious leaders didn’t – was the fact that they were open to change. They initially gave their “no” to the Father, but then turned. That’s what repentance means. To ‘turn back.’ To ‘change your mind,’ and ‘change directions.’ And they did. Would the Pharisees? Will we? They maybe did not have all the knowledge, but they have something far richer and needed, a Relationship with Jesus. This is the “Why” of worship.

Reflection Questions

1. Which son do you identify with? Why is it important to examine your motivations and your response to the person of Jesus? What is the assurance that follows your response?
2. What “work” is there to be done in our response to the free gift of Grace? Do you lean more towards Enjoying or Glorifying God? How does Psalm 67 ease that tension for yourself?
3. In what ways do the “How” and “Why” of Spiritual Disciplines matter? How would the “How” and “Why” reflect in the difference between “Religion” and “Relationship”?