

Mysteries of the Kingdom - Matthew 21:28-32

TWO SONS

This parable, along with the two that follow it, comprise a series of three parables. Here we look at Matthew 21:28-32, the parable of Two Sons. These are NOT just three separate parables; they are very much inter-related. Jesus told them in response to a challenge to His authority. Earlier in the chapter Jesus cleansed the temple. The next day He cursed a fig tree. After this, He was questioned by the leaders. What authority do you have to do these things? they asked Him. Jesus asks them about John the Baptist. Where did he get his authority? Jesus wanted to know. The question was eluded by the leaders, so Jesus refused to answer them as well. Instead, He tells these three parables!

Each parable shows how they had rebelled against God's authority. In fact, they show their rebellion was a complete rebellion, because upon closer examination we see that the first parable describes rebellion against the Father, the second parable describes rebellion against the Son, and the third parable describes rebellion against the Spirit. When all three persons of the Godhead are rebelled against, rebellion cannot be any more complete!

In this parable, it is clear who Jesus has in mind. The vineyard was the nation of Israel (Is. 5:1-7). The two sons were two classes of people (the religious crowd represented by the son who said I will go, but does not; and the crowd of sinners represented by the son who said I won't go, but later repents and does go). It is very much a parable of contrasts. Notice some of these contrasts presented to us.

First of all, notice the **Two Aspects of the Parable**. Is this a parable about salvation or about service? I do not believe it is an either/or but a both/and. Both aspects are presented in the parable.

Consider the aspect of *salvation*. Jesus makes it clear that the parable deals with issues of salvation in vv. 31b-32: Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

It has been accurately said that there are only two kinds of people - those who are saved and those who are not saved. That is exactly what Jesus has in mind here! The sinners were in but the religious were out! The truth presented in this parable is the truth presented all throughout scripture: it does not matter how good you are or how much work you do for God. None of us do more than the Pharisees did! Perhaps that is best illustrated by Paul who, describing himself and all he did, said in Philippians 3:5: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee."

Paul was a model Pharisee. He kept the Law. Those hearing this parable of Jesus kept the Law meticulously. And, as the parable indicates, they thought their own righteousness was good enough! In contrast, those who were sinners without question repented. The result was as v. 31 said: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. As the saying goes, salvation is not something we achieve, but something we receive!

But we also see another aspect in this parable. Notice also the aspect of *service*. The fact remains, each son was asked to go and work in the vineyard. Some seem to think they are saved to sit and soak in all the blessings! Others are saved and then they sit and sulk in lost sinful pleasures. But the truth is we are saved not to sit and do anything but in order to serve! The need for believers serving in the world today is SO evident. Did you realize that almost 25% of world's population lives on less \$75/year? Half a billion people are currently starving. All this in spite of the work of numerous relief agencies!

But even worse than the physical hunger is the spiritual hunger that exists. Only 25% of the population is identified as Christian (yet many of them are tares!). Another 25% have heard but do not profess. And a full 50% have never even heard the name of Jesus! The need for us to serve is clearly evident. Even if we refuse to see these realities, we still have the clear command of Christ in Luke 10:2: He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

We are called to work in the vineyard - called by none other than the owner Himself. Who is that owner? It is God for as the Psalmist said, "The earth is the Lord's . . ." (Ps. 24:1). The earth is His and He calls us to service in the vineyard, service in this world. How we respond shows our view of the next contrast we see.

Notice the **Two Authorities in the Parable**. We see first the authority of God's Word. It is God Himself who said Go, work in my vineyard! Not long ago there was a bumper sticker on many cars. It said, God said it, I believe it, that settles it. The truth is, if God says it, that settles it whether we believe it or not! The first son appeared to NOT accept God's word. But notice that v. 29 tells us that "afterward he repented and went." This is NOT the normal word for repent, the Greek *metanoeo*, which means to think differently. Instead, this is the Greek *metamelomai* and it used here in the middle voice, which is the reflexive voice. In Greek, there are three voices: the active voice where you do something; the passive voice where something is done to you; and the middle voice where you do something to yourself. The middle voice is used in this verb. Hence it is a situation not influenced by outside force. He was not persuaded by another. He simply came under conviction and regretted his original decision!

What a beautiful picture of the power and authority of God's Word. John came preaching truth. The tax gatherers and sinners did not like it because it convicted them. Yet it had authority and the more they thought on it the more they regretted their life. They were just like son who told his father, I do not want to work! But then he thought, dad does a lot for me; he provides, protects, and so much more. Working for him today is the least I could do!

George Roche, former president of Hillsdale College, once wrote, "Although millions of us still attend church and profess to believe in a Creator, we hold ourselves aloof from God. He is not, as He should be, the most important, guiding force in our daily lives. In one way, this is more shocking than if we had become atheists. Atheists deny God and His authority. We accept Him, but we refuse to take Him seriously."

God's Word carries absolute authority. Have you ever read the Bible or heard a message, felt conviction and knew a change was needed? God's word has authority to convict and demand change! But, unfortunately, too many live by another authority!

That's the authority of Man's Wisdom. This was the authority of the second son. It was the authority of the Pharisees and scribes as well. They had all the outward show of obedience - oh, if God says it, we will do it were the words! But the attitude was well you know we are already doing so much for God. We are SO much more obedient than those

sinner and hypocrite. They were just like the son who said, sure dad, I'll go work - anything for you dad - just ask and count on me. But later he said, you know it's hot today, I'm tired, and I do so much anyway. Dad won't know!

Friends, we are foolish when we think we have a better plan than God! I was corresponding with a friend once about the issue of female pastors. Where I was serving at that time we happened to have a female pastor in a nearby church who also happened to be African-American. I have received some correspondence from some about this issue that is dominated by man's wisdom. In short, it says we should not deal with it because of issues of racism that will be raised, or because there will be a loss of unity among the churches, and a host of other issues. Yet nobody seems to want to deal with what Scripture has to say. I had asked my friend for his thoughts. After sharing the scriptural position he concluded, "our part is really quite simple - trust and obey."

The contrast between God's Word and man's wisdom seems as foolishness to the world. But to those who know the truth, it is a matter of supreme importance. Paul stated it well in 1 Cor. 1:20-25: Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

I ask you, what is your authority? Do you base your actions and life on your own wisdom or the infallible Word of God? Your answer to that will largely reveal the final contrast we note today.

Notice the **Two Attitudes in the Parable**. These are the same two attitudes we will have today: rebellion or repentance. Consider first, *Rebellion*. In v. 32 we are told the leaders did not repent. Refusal to repent is the essence of rebellion. Their rebellion was compounded in that, as v. 32 indicates, they "saw" the irreligious repent. The phrase "had seen it" is a single Greek word. It is a verb that means more than physical sight. It means to direct the thoughts toward the object seen. It is often translated perceive or behold. In other words, these leaders truly understood the change that had taken place in these publicans and sinners. Yet rather than rejoice, they scoffed and rebelled! It is almost as though they said, they can try to repent all they want - but we are good enough as we are!

Contrast to that the attitude of *Repentance*. Repentance is godly sorrow. It is not being sorrow that you've been caught, but realizing that your sin offends a holy and righteous God! As mentioned earlier, the word used in this case signifies to have remorse or regret. Is that the kind of repentance that is characteristic of your life?

In his book, The Parables of Jesus, James M. Boice says of this repentant son: ". . . we must not think that Jesus was approving everything about him. . . . In approving the eventual obedience of this first son Jesus was not approving his initial disobedience. The only thing that was good about him is that, although he had arrogantly defied his father when the command was first given, he later repented and did his father's will.

". . . there are people today, often young people, who think that it is all right for them to go their own way as long as they go God's way at some later point. They want to have fun

now and serve God later - when they are too old to be of much use or when their opportunities for sound preparation are gone. Granted, it is better for them to sin now and repent later than for them to sin now and not repent at all. But it does not follow that there is not a better way than either. The best way is to come to Jesus early and serve Him both early and late. It is best to give your entire life to His service.

“Besides, if you delay now, you have no guarantee that you will be able to come to Jesus later. You may, but sin takes its toll, and one of the things sin does is entrap us so that we cannot get free even if we wish to, and usually we do not even want our freedom. If God is speaking to you and you are saying no, you should know that, although it may be hard for you to say yes now, it will be even harder to say it the next time around - even assuming that God speaks to you again. The only safe thing is to give prompt and sincere obedience to God’s call.”

Therein is an excellent summary of the attitude of repentance that God desires.

God is gracious. Instead of sending judgment, He sent His Son which leads us into the next parable. In this parable, however, there are two sons - two very different types of people. And a very important question asked by Jesus in v. 31: “which of the two did the will of his father?”

Each of us is one of these sons. We are repentant people who accept the authority of God’s Word, or we are rebellious sons who live under the authority of our own wisdom. The question of Jesus is still applicable? If you are rebellious, you are not in the will of God. Only those who are repentant belong to Him. Are you doing the will of your Father today?