

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Deeds of Repentance

Matthew 21:23-32

In the sermon I preached two weeks ago, before I left for vacation, I focused on God's gift of sleep. Be assured that during the time that my family and I were away, I tried to practice what I preached. Our travels involved plenty of shut-eye. Let's just say that hotel pillow technology has come a long way over the years. But you still have to maneuver with the tightly tucked sheets, darken the room with the curtains, and figure out the best setting for the thermostat. When you're on the road, it can take a little time and effort to settle into a place of rest.

In this morning's parable from Matthew, we meet two children who have become experts at rest and relaxation. A father has two sons. One morning, the father comes downstairs to the family room and finds one of his sons stretched out on the couch, binge-watching Netflix, with a box of Pop-Tarts nestled beside him. "Come on, get moving," says the father. "I need you to go work in the warehouse at the family business today." "Sorry, no can do," replies the son. "I'd rather just chill out here at the house all day." But after a while, the son reconsiders his resistance, and does what his father says.

The father also goes upstairs to his other son's room. This one has his hands glued to the controller for his Xbox. "Shut your games off," says the father. "There's work to be done out down at the warehouse." "Sure thing," says the son. "I'll be glad to help. Just give me a minute to change clothes." An hour later, he's still laying on his bed, trying to reach the next level of Call of Duty. Another hour passes, and then another, and another. Eventually, he never shows up for work.

There's a lot of flip flopping going on in this story that Jesus tells. One son initially says no but then changes his mind and says yes. The other son first says yes but ends up really saying no. So what's going on here? Are these just two very indecisive siblings, or is there a bigger lesson to be learned?

The question that follows this parable helps us get a better handle on the story. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" asks Jesus. So this is a story about doing what the father wants. This sounds a lot like something Jesus said earlier in Matthew's Gospel about people who are content to possess his teachings without actually practicing them. Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21, TNIV).

So which of the two sons did what his father wanted? Was it the one who initially rejected his dad's command, but then changed his mind and went to work? Or was it the one who was all gung ho about getting to work, but never acted on his promise? What do you think?

Like most of Jesus' parables, this one is about the kingdom of God, and about how much is riding on the way that you respond to the arrival of God's reign. In the parable's original setting, many people who at first seemed like unfit candidates for

the kingdom—revenue collectors for the Roman government, women who made a living by selling their bodies for sex—had repented and come into the life of heaven. By contrast, the good, respectable, religious folks just couldn't see their need for God's saving mercy. Though they had originally said yes to God's call, they had become complacent and self-assured. But now Jesus tells them to take a look, and see how the unholy types who had first said no to God's will were now saying yes and were stepping into God's kingdom ahead of them.

As I said, how you respond to the arrival of God's kingdom makes all the difference. If you can look back on your life and see that you have said yes to Jesus as Lord, and to becoming one of his disciples, then give thanks to God for how his grace has operated in you. But never let your initial promise to follow Jesus become the beginning, and the end, of your discipleship. In the story of the two sons, Jesus warns us about the dangers of saying yes to God's will without also doing God's will.

Years ago, when I was in graduate school, I took a temporary job for the summer. I spent a lot of my time in the attic room of the Blue Cross Blue Shield offices in Durham, North Carolina. Though the room was poorly lit and isolated from the rest of the building, it did have a small section that was air conditioned, as well as an old TV that would pick up a channel or two when its broken antenna was leaning in just the right position. Other than these two bright spots, I could tell that I had been given a mission that the rest of the staff had avoided for years. One of my main jobs was to go through shelf after shelf after shelf of disorganized, dusty Medicare files, rearranging the folders in chronological order. It was a lonely, tedious task.

One day, my supervisor informed me that another temp had been hired. Part of his job was to assist me in the attic. As soon as he took a look at the place, I could tell that he wasn't thrilled about the assignment. During that morning, he and I would occasionally strike up a conversation. I tried to use my experience and determination to encourage him as he sorted through the folders. But I could tell this was the last place he wanted to be. Eventually, lunch hour arrived. I went down to the staff cafeteria and he left to grab a bite somewhere in town. Apparently it was in another town. After returning to work, I used my attic window to keep an eye on the parking lot. Fifteen minutes passed. Half an hour. Then an hour. He never came back. As far as I know, he never showed up for work there again.

When it comes to the kingdom of God, you can't just sign up. You also have to show up. Being a disciple of Jesus means showing up for work every day in the reign of God. It means daily repentance and faith. Daily turning away from sin and turning toward God. Daily taking up your own cross so that you can die to self and live for God. Daily spreading the good news and serving others in the name of Jesus. Daily asking God to show you how he wants you to participate in what he is doing in the world. Daily discerning how he is calling you to think, speak, and act as a witness for the kingdom.

Preacher Fred Craddock once spoke to a group of ministers about the practical implications of consecration. In other words, giving our lives to Christ. He said,

To give my life for Christ appears glorious. To pour myself out for others . . . to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom—I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—"Here's my life Lord. I'm giving it all."

But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting our 25 cents here and 50 cents there.

Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, "Get lost." Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home.¹

Whatever route God has used to bring you to faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to following him, thanks be to God. But remember that the way forward from there is usually 25 cents at a time, in daily faithful obedience to the call of Christ.

In the parable of the two sons, a lot of things come under Christ's judgment. Our complacency. Our self-righteousness. Our hard-heartedness. And along with these, our unfulfilled promises. Our good intentions.

One of the father's sons has the best intentions in the world. "You can count on me dad. See you at the warehouse." But then things start to break down. Maybe he just couldn't pry himself loose from his game controller. Maybe someone else came by with an invitation to something that seemed more fun. Maybe he assumed that he had all the time in the world. He could go work at the warehouse tomorrow. Maybe he thought that his dad would settle for a hasty promise. After all, when he said yes to his father, he meant well. Doesn't that count for something?

For whatever reasons, his lips said yes but his actions said no. He never did show up for work. He becomes the poster child for the old saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

In the kingdom of God, good intentions alone won't get you very far. In fact, they can be downright dangerous. They can deceive you into thinking that discerning the will of God, without actually doing the will of God, is somehow enough. A promise may be fine for the moment. But this parable is about more than just the moment. It's about the nitty gritty of the kingdom of heaven. It's about deeds of repentance. It's about sticking in there for the long haul of God's reign.

In an essay on the parable of the two sons, theologian Soren Kierkegaard warns about the illusion of good intentions. He writes:

The good intention, the "Yes," taken in vain, the unfulfilled promise leaves a residue of despair, of dejection. Beware! Good intention can very soon flare up again in more passionate declarations of intention, but only to leave behind even greater desperation. As an alcoholic constantly requires stronger and stronger drink, so the one who has fallen under the spell of good intentions and smooth-sounding declaration constantly requires more and more good intentions. And so he keeps himself from seeing that he is walking backwards.²

The good news is that you don't have to go backwards. Repentance and faith is an ongoing enterprise that always leads forward. Remember that there's another son in this story, a son who at first said no but later changed his mind and went to work. He did what the father wanted.

Our heavenly Father wants you to say yes to Jesus, even if you've spent your whole life saying no. If, on the other hand, you've said yes to Jesus, but you've grown content to possess his teachings without practicing them, remember that there's work waiting for you. So fulfill your promises. Act on your intentions. Answer the Lord's call, and show up for work each day in the kingdom of God.

¹ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 200.

² <http://www.bruderhof.com/articles/UnderTheSpell.htm>