

The Parable of the Two Sons

V. 28. *“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. V. 29. He answered and said, I will not, but afterward he regretted it and went. (v. 30. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir, but he did not go. (v. 31). Which of the two did the will of his father? They said to Him, The first. Jesus said to them, Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom 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 afterwards relent and believe him,”* Matt. 21:28-32.

Jesus, “the Master Teacher,” often taught great truths by using simple parables. The preceding verses contain one of many parables Jesus taught during His earthly ministry. In these verses Jesus told the story of a father who had two sons, both to whom he said *“Son, go, work today in my vineyard,”* Matt. 21:28,30. The first son rebelliously answered, saying, *“I will not.”* However, afterwards *“He regretted”* his answer, and *“he went,”* meaning that he went to work in his father’s vineyard. In contrast, the other son respectfully said, *“I go, sir,”* but then the text says *“he did **not** go,”* v. 30.

Before enlarging upon the meaning of the parable, let us first consider its context. In the preceding verses in this chapter we note that the chapter began with a record of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, fulfilling the prophecy of Zech. 9:9 by *“sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey,”* and the multitude crying out, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest,”* v. 5,9. As Jesus entered Jerusalem *“all the city was moved, saying, ‘Who is this,’ and the multitude then said ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee,’”* Matt. 21:1-11. Then we read of Jesus cleansing the temple, Matt. 21:12-17, healing the blind and the lame, which resulted in the chief priests and scribes becoming *“indignant,”* v. 15. Then we read of Jesus pronouncing a curse upon the barren fig tree, Matt. 21:17-19, followed by the chief priests and elders of the people confronting Him and asking *“By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority”* (Matt. 21:23-27).

In the events recorded in Matthew chapter 21 leading up to Jesus’ parable of the two sons, there is a consistent contrast between the Jewish leaders and the people in general. For example, with regards to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem in which the multitude praised Jesus, whereas, as we note in a parallel reference to this account (Luke 19:28-40), the Pharisees urged Jesus to *“rebuke Your disciples,”* Luke 19:39. They chaffed at the idea of Jesus being praised by the people; they wanted all the praise for themselves! When Jesus cleansed the temple and *“healed”* the blind and the lame, the people in general praised Jesus, saying, *“Hosanna to the Son of David,”* at which time the chief priests and scribes became *“indignant,”* v. 15. As previously noted, the chief priests and elders of the people confronted Jesus as He was teaching, and asked *“By what authority are you doing these things? And Who gave You this authority,”* Matt. 21:23. Jesus replied to their question **with** a question, namely this: *“the baptism of John — where was it from? From heaven or from men”* (v. 25). Their cowardly reply, saying, *“we do not know,”* v. 27, reflected their hypocrisy, in that they feared *“the multitude”* (v. 25), who heeded John’s baptism, whereas *“the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized of “ John, cf. Luke 7:30). The scribes and Pharisees and elders of the people prided themselves in that they represented the religious hierarchy of that time; they were the elitists in spiritual matters (or so they perceived themselves!). But they rejected Jesus, even though the law and prophets testified of Jesus, John 5:39-40. They also rejected John the Baptist, and his baptism, even though John was the prophetically described “voice of one crying in the wilderness,” who came preparing “the way of the Lord,”* Matt. 3:1-3; Isa. 40:3-5.

As noted, in the events immediately **prior** to the Lord relating the parable of the two sons, it is evident that a contrast is seen between the Jewish religious leaders and the people in general. For that matter, in the parable which **followed** this parable, namely, “the parable of the vine dressers,” Matt. 21:33-46, a contrast is also given between the “*wicked*” vinedressers and that of “*other vinedressers who will render to Him the fruits in their seasons,*” v. 41. At the conclusion of this parable, “*the chief priests and Pharisees...perceived that **He was speaking of them,***” and they “*sought to lay hands on Him*” but they “*feared the multitude, because they took Him for a prophet,*” Matt. 21:45-46.

Clearly, in the verses immediately preceding, and following, the parable of the two sons, it is evident that the scribes, Pharisees, and elders of the people (for the most part) were a bunch of religious hypocrites who loved the praise of men and resented any of the accolades that Jesus received from the people in general.

All of this constitutes a rather lengthy introduction to a discussion of the parable of the two sons, but it helps in that it brings the story into context. You see, the “*two sons*” in this parable contextually represents two groups of people; specifically, the religious leaders of the Jews who upon hearing their father say “*go, work today in my vineyard,*” initially said “*I go, sir,*” but did not go, whereas the son who immediately answered saying, “*I will not, but afterward regretted it and went,*” represented “*tax collectors and harlots,*” a despised group of people, but whom Jesus said would enter “*the kingdom of God before*” **before** the chief priests and elders of the people! Imagine the situation! The chief priests and elders of the people were very proud of their imagined spiritual superiority, but Jesus unfavorably compared them to the despised tax collectors and harlots!

Historically, this is how it played out. Regarding the teachings of Jesus, “*the common people heard Him gladly,*” Mark 12:37, whereas the Jewish religious leaders generally despised Him with a passion, and they were the ones who a short time later would insist on Jesus being crucified (Matt. 27:20-23), while favoring the release of Barabbas, a notorious criminal who had been imprisoned because of “*rebellion and murder,*” Luke 23:19! More could be said by way of contrasting the response of the people in general with that of the scribes, Pharisees, and elders of the people, as it relates to the teachings, miracles, and example of Jesus. They were the more learned students of the Old Testament which had so much to say about the coming Messiah (Luke 24:44), but, for the most part, they rejected Jesus with a passion. They represented the son in the parable who, upon being told to “*go work today in my vineyard,*” answered, saying, *I go sir, but..did **not** go,*” Matt. 21:30.

Application for Today

1. We must “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:21)! The “*second*” son in this parable heard his father’s instructions, and he said, “*I go sir,*” but “*he did not go.*” On the one hand, he lied by refusing to do what he said he would do. But he was like so many today who profess Jesus as “*Lord,*” but refuse to do what He says. Cf. Luke 6:46.

2. God holds us accountable to our response to His word! Keeping His commandments is essential to our salvation. Cf. Matt. 7:21-23; John 14:14,21,23; I John 2:3-4, et. In keeping His commandments we do not merit salvation; we are simply doing our duty. Cf. Luke 17:10. Yes, grace is unmerited, but it is not cheap! We cannot be saved by the **grace** of God while ignoring the **commandments** of God.

3. It is possible for those who initially rejected the commandments of God to

afterward regret their former rebellion, and do His will. That is what the “*first*” son in this parable did. Upon hearing his father say, “*son, go work today in my vineyard,*” he said, “*I will not, but afterward he regretted it and went,*” Matt. 21:29.

4. Religious leaders are not always right! The son who said “*I go sir,*” in reply to his father’s instruction to “*go work today in my vineyard,*” but “*did not go*” contextually represented the religious hierarchy of that day; they were the highly regarded, and very influential religious leaders of that day. However, they were also “*blind leaders of the blind*” (Matt. 15:15)! They had been to their rabbinical schools; many of them, like Saul of Tarsus, had been “*taught according to the perfect manner of the Law,*” Acts 22:3, but they were in error, and even “*transgressed the commandments of God*” because of their tradition, Matt. 15:3! And they have many modern counterparts!

Conclusion: There are other lessons we could learn from the parable of the two sons, but these are sufficient for us to make the following points: (1) Hear God’s word, (2) Obey God’s Word, (3) Honor your promises, and (4) always “*believe not every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world,*” I John 4:1. Consider ye well!

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