

The Father's Will

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second sermon.

Reading: **Matthew 21: 28-32**
(14 minutes)ⁱ

Theme: *"Doing the Father's Will involves hearing God's call, repenting and acting"*

A couple of months ago we had a home fellowship meeting in the hall and we were asked which character in the Bible we would like to have been. I said I'd like to have been the disciple that Jesus loved, to have that immediate and intimate relationship with him. But in retrospect, I don't know if I would have survived Jesus way with words. Have you ever noticed how penetrating Jesus is with words? He speaks the truth in words that penetrate to the heart, that divide muscle and bone – I myself feel afraid of that kind of direct honesty.

Our gospel reading today, the parable of the two sons, is a good example of how direct and penetrating Jesus could be. And although he spoke to an audience two thousand years ago, his words remain highly relevant to us this morning.

But first, let's pray together. "Father, I thank you for sending your Holy Spirit, who reveals Christ to us and who helps us examine our hearts. Holy Spirit, I pray this morning that you would open our eyes to see the truth of our hearts, just like the Father sees us. And that you will give us the courage to change. In Jesus name."

Please open your Bibles to Matthew 21 and verse 28. In this passage, we have a parable about two sons, which Jesus uses to help tease out a key element of the Christian life, namely doing the will of the father.

Before we jump into the parable, let's look at its context. The first thing I'd like you to notice is *when* this parable takes place. If you look at the beginning of chapter 21, you'll see that Jesus recently entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkeyⁱⁱ. In fact, this parable takes place on the Tuesday of the passion week. Jesus knows that the cross is just days away, and His teaching during this time takes on an intensity and a directnessⁱⁱⁱ – as if he trying much harder to convey the most important messages while he still has time on earth. So what I really want you to note here, is that it was *extremely important for Jesus that we understand the message of this parable*.

The second thing I'd like you to notice is to *whom* Jesus tells this parable. If you look at the section preceding the parable, from verse 23, you'll notice that Jesus is confronted, rather directly, by the chief priests and elders of the people. Jesus asks them "John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven or from men?" By doing so, he highlights their unwillingness to respond to John's preaching about Jesus. So what I want you to notice here, is that Jesus is speaking to a group of *people whose hearts are hardened towards Jesus*.

So, with those two elements of context in mind, let's look at the parable.

Verse 28 introduces a man – a father. The father has two sons. The father asks the two sons, first the one then the other, to go and work today in the vineyard. Obviously, the father is actually God the Father. The chief priests and elders, and we ourselves, are the sons. And the vineyard is a metaphor for the Kingdom of God, the reign of God on earth. So God is asking us to go and work for the Kingdom of God – today. It is an immediate call to do God's work.

The question that Jesus hides in this verse is “Will you do the will of the Father?” Can you hear that? This is the theme of the parable, and Jesus introduces it right from the outset. Jesus is asking me and you, “Will you do the will of God the Father?”

And by telling us how the two children responded to the father’s request, Jesus actually gives us insight into *what* the father’s will is. So, let’s look at the two sons, and see how they responded to the father’s request:

- The first son is described in verse 29. This son says, “I will not”. He’s very clear about not being interested in what his father wants. But later he changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard.
- This second son is described in verse 30. This son responds to the father’s request with, “I will, sir”. Very polite and positive, “Yes, Lord, I will do as you ask”. (Wouldn’t we love to have children who were this polite!) But this child did not go and work in the vineyard.

Then in verse 31, when Jesus asks which of the two sons did the father’s will, the chief priests answer ‘the first son’. At face value, it would seem obvious that the first son did the father’s will because he went to work in the vineyard. If this is the case, the parable is saying that we do the father’s will when we act obediently – that God is then more interested in our actions than in our words. But I don’t think this is what Jesus is actually intending.

Let’s take a closer look at the responses of the two sons in verses 29 and 30 and see what Jesus is really saying to us. In both cases we have a call to work in the vineyard; in both we have a verbal response (I will not or I will); and in both we have a physical response (he went or he did not go). But can you identify something else that is different? Something strikingly different in the way Jesus presents the two responses?

Yes! In the case of the first child, there is the phrase, “later he *changed his mind*”, while for the second child there is no change of mind. The second child says, “I will go” but does not, without changing his mind. Surely this suggests that he never *intended* to go in the first place? He said the words that the father wanted to hear, but with no intention of acting them out.

So what distinguishes the first child from the second is not so much that he actually went to work in the vineyard, but rather that he changed his mind, he *repented*^v – he *responded* to the call of the father, he allowed himself to be *moved* and *transformed*. And as a result of this repentance, he went and did what the Father asked in the first place – he went to work in his father’s vineyard, the Kingdom of God.

Can you follow this? Jesus has presented us with a question, “Will you do the father’s will?” But this question begs another question, namely, “What is the father’s will”. And the answer to that question is that we do the will of the father when we respond to his call, when we look honestly at our hearts and recognise that we need to change and then act on that change^v. The response starts on the inside and works to the outside – inside-out. God is not looking for a superficial outward conformity; he is looking for a deep and fundamental transformation on the inside, which is followed by an outward expression.

Jesus confirms this in the last two verses of the passage. He says that when the tax collectors and prostitutes – who clearly were not doing what God wanted – when they *heard* John’s teachings about Jesus and righteousness and salvation, they *responded* and are thus *entering* the Kingdom of God. This hearing, responding and entering is exactly what Jesus said about the first son – he heard the father’s call, changed his mind, and went to work in the vineyard!

By contrast, the chief priests and elders also heard John’s teachings and even saw the tax collectors and prostitutes repenting and believing and changing their lives. But *they* did not repent and believe. And because of this, they are not entering the Kingdom of God. And this is exactly what he had said about the second son – he heard the father’s call, responded hypocritically, and did not change.

Does this make sense? The crux of the parable is that we do the will of the father when we *respond* to God's call – and this response is characterised first by inward repentance (changing our mind) and then by outward action (working in God's Kingdom).

So, dear friends, I must ask you, as I have been asking myself for the past few weeks, how are you like the two sons? In what ways are you like the first son, who hears God's call, who softens his heart and changes his mind, and who goes out and does God's work in God's kingdom? And in what ways are you like the second son, who also hears God's call and says all the right things, but who does not really change inside, and who neglects to do God's work?

The little green card that you received when you arrived this morning – and yes, you'll get one every time I preach! – was designed to help you think through these questions and to examine your heart. I urge you to pray through the questions on the card during your next quiet time or devotional. On the one side I've summarised the contrast that Jesus draws between the two sons. And on the other I've presented you with some specific questions to help you reflect on this.

I have been grappling with these questions this past week, and must confess the many ways that I am more like the second son. I hear but don't respond; I know I must change but I don't soften my heart; I say the right things but don't act on them. The Holy Spirit has been very gracious in helping to reveal my heart to me. I know that I can only be more like the first son if I rely on the God, on the Holy Spirit, for strength.

And this is my prayer for you: That you would allow the Holy Spirit to reveal your heart to you, to examine yourself honestly, to know yourself as the Father knows you. And that the Holy Spirit would give you the strength, the courage and hope to change your mind and to respond in faith and obedience – for this is the will of the Father.

Amen.

Notes

ⁱ I tried to preach this sermon differently from the previous sermon. Last time I wrote it out in full, and then preached from it in full – not reading it, but following the script very closely. This time, I wrote it out in full, and then preached extemporaneously from the Bible – I didn't take the script with me. I wanted to see if it would be fresher and more spontaneous.

In fact, it was fresher and more spontaneous. Although I did not memorise the sermon word for word, I knew the content of each paragraph and the flow of thought, and that is what I produced – quite similar across the two services (7 and 9am). But felt as if I was really communicating with the congregation rather than talking/reading to them (which is how some of our other preachers feel). And I felt that I was really preaching the Word – all I took up with me was my Bible, and I preached directly from and in relation to the text. In retrospect, I think this really helped, because the text itself was my outline and notes, helping me to move through the sequences.

Got good feedback from lots of people. The common theme in feedback was that the sermon was simple yet profound, clean and uncluttered yet thought provoking. Which is wonderful.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 21:1-11

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 23

^{iv} Although the Greek word is actually not repentance, but rather to change one's mind (Colin, V.1, p. 356), it is the same word translated as 'repent' in verse 32 of the same passage – so the link is made between the first son who 'repented' (v29) and the chief priests who did not 'repent' (v32). Incidentally, the word is used in only one other place in the synoptic Gospels – in Mat 27:3, where Judas is said to be 'seized with remorse' for betraying Jesus after seeing Jesus condemned. The word is also used in 2Cor7:8, where it is translated as 'regret'; and in Heb 7:21 where it is translated as 'change his mind': "The Lord has sworn and will not *change his mind*".

^v See note iv above – by using the same Greek word in both verses 29 and 32, the case is well established to regard this ‘change of mind’ as the key theme of this passage, viz that being willing to ‘change our mind’ is the key component of ‘doing the father’s will’.