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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
October 11, 2020
19th Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 28-32, Philippians 2:1-11
Hymns: 226:1-3, 8; 408; 32; 453:2

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Matthew 21:28-32

“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.’²⁹ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went.³⁰ Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go.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 of God 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 afterward relent and believe him. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Defining “Faith”

That is trickier than one might think. I have this conversation repeatedly with catechism classes. Some will start with simply defining faith as believing. Believing what? Answer: “Believing in

God.” “Believing that God exists?” One might go further than that; Faith is believing that what God says is true. That is still not enough, as our text would demonstrate. Then my students will finally get around to the very heart of our faith, with the answer, “Believing in Jesus? And I will ask, “Believing what about Jesus?” Then we will hear the gospel. One of the students will answer, “Believing that Jesus died on the cross for my sins.”

Now, are we done? In Catechism it will most often end there, but in our text today the Lord Jesus would bring us one step further yet to comprehend what genuine faith encompasses, for it is truly centered in how the Lord calls us to repentance, and our understanding all that true repentance includes. May the Holy Spirit lead us in --

THEME: Responding to the Lord’s Call with the Obedience of Faith.

Once again we see Jesus using a parable to get His point across to His audience. However on this occasion Jesus’ target audience is not His disciples. It is the scribes and Pharisees who were there watching Him critically, that they might find fault with Jesus. This was happening in Jerusalem in the middle of what we call Holy Week. It is only a couple days later that Jesus will be taken by His enemies and His passion begins. Keeping this context in mind, let us learn from Jesus’ interplay with the Pharisees that we might –

I. Avoid Sanctimonious Hypocrisy.

Jesus began with a question addressed to the Pharisees:

Matthew 21:28-31 “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.’ ²⁹He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. ³⁰Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of *his* father?”

They said to Him, “The first.”

You have the two sons in the parable. The first one is rather rude in his reply to his father. He has doesn’t want to go and makes it very

clear that he doesn't want to work in the vineyard, despite his father's gentle request, his father's call to familial duty.

The second son isn't like that at all. He responds with fine words to his father's call to duty that he should work in the family vineyard. He answers with respect calling him "sir," and says all the right words. What was missing was the necessary action to give real meaning to those words. The second son said "yes," but he didn't go. His fine words were not accompanied with obedience.

Jesus' real question for the Pharisees was, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The Pharisees walked right into Jesus' trap by answering, "The first." That leaves the second son, the one who sounded so respectful, as the one who actually continued in disobedience.

Jesus went on into the application of this parable. The correlation in Jewish society with the first son whose initial response was sinful were those repentant sinners, who when called by the Lord, turned away from their sinful ways. This was evident for the Pharisees to observe way back when John the Baptist was preaching repentance and baptizing people for the remission of their sins. Many people, including tax collectors and yes, prostitutes, and soldiers who often bullied and extorted money from people, many of these sinners heard the Lord's call to enter His vineyard, and they repented.

The Pharisees watched, and looked down upon this lot of sinners as being unworthy. They saw no need for repentance within themselves. Surely, they were not dirty sinners like these others! They saw no need to make any changes in their lives. They were already very religious, said all the right words, and observed all the correct rituals and rules and regulations. They were already righteous in their own eyes. They saw no need for changing anything either in the way they thought about God or to change in the way they lived.

This was the epitome of *sanctimonious hypocrisy!* John the Baptist called them out, saying: "*Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee*

from the wrath to come? ⁸ Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance!” (Matthew 3:7-8)

Now let us pause here to examine our own hearts and lives. This is really what we ought to do whenever we come before the Lord. We are very good at saying all the right words. The right words are all written out for you in the bulletin. We say them all with meaning and sincerity. We confess our sins. We turn to the Lord seeking His mercy and grace. He bestows that grace upon us in proclaiming to us the forgiveness of sins. He forgives us for Jesus' sake, not because of anything we have done to show that we deserve forgiveness. And for this grace we rejoice and praise the Lord!

The danger is that this becomes a formality for us that assures us of a righteousness that is tied to saying the right words, and that is the end of it. That would be very similar to the sanctimonious hypocrisy of the Pharisees. The grace of forgiveness is certainly not a license to sin, and I would hope that to that we would all agree. However it is not to be the end of our faith life, that we might confine our relationship with the Lord to here at church: “I came to church I said and heard all the right words and now I can get on with my life.”

We might convince ourselves that even coming to church doesn't seem all that necessary. Why bother going to church if our faith takes us no farther than the church doors? Our religion could become the empty thing that the unbelieving world suggests it is. How often churches are accused of being havens for hypocrites! Let us be aware of the danger of empty formalism in our faith. We could so easily become like the son who was so respectful but then didn't heed his father's call to go and work in the vineyard. Remember Jesus' words of warning near the end of the Sermon on the Mount: “*Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 7:21)

Let us rather --

II. Follow the Pattern of Genuine Repentance.

The son who responded rudely to his father's call later relented. He changed his mind. That is what the Lord has done with us. He has called us by the gospel. We have heard those words of grace already this morning. *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1:9) The Lord has cleansed us from all unrighteousness! He has forgiven us richly and freely! That grace of forgiveness changes our minds as well as our hearts. Believing in God leads us to think differently about everything: about God, about our sins, about responding to the Lord's call not only to trust in Jesus for forgiveness, but to desire to serve the Lord Jesus with our lives. By grace we find ourselves among those sinners who have regretted our unfaithfulness to the Lord and His Word, and are now ready to go and work in the vineyards of the Lord.

In the gospels we read of such people. We know how Peter and Andrew, and James and John left their fishing boats behind and gave themselves in service to the Lord. Not bad enough sinners? How about Matthew, who was also known as Levi the tax collector for Rome, who heard the Lord's gracious call and left behind the tax booth and immediately entered the vineyards of the Lord. He invited many others tax collectors and sinners, including women of ill repute, to come and meet the Lord, and hear Jesus' gracious call for themselves. Just a few days before Jesus spoke the words of our text He was passing through Jericho and there was another of these tax collectors named Zacchaeus, who responded to the Lord's call to come down out of the sycamore tree, and serve the Lord. How marvelously Zacchaeus responded in repentance! He restored four times as much as he had taken wrongly from people and gave half his money to the poor! While Jesus' enemies complained that Jesus would associate with such a sinner, Jesus rejoiced that salvation had come to the house of Zacchaeus, for Jesus had *"come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:1-10)

How then ought we to respond to the Lord's call to enter and work in His vineyard? Every time we come to church we are reminded of the richness of His grace toward us who believe. That gifts of grace that the Lord has extended to us include the forgiveness of sins, faith in Jesus for eternal life, and a new goal and purpose in life, the opportunity to work in the vineyards of the Lord.

We aren't called to sit on the sidelines. We are called to serve the Lord and show Him the depth of our love and gratitude. As children of God who are called to faith we are also being called to use the gifts and abilities He has given us to the praise and glory of His name.

Maybe we can sum up the impact of this parable of our Lord with that phrase, "*Actions speak louder than words.*" It is great that we confess our faith in Jesus and come together to sing His praises in church. It is the very least the Lord expects of us, the very **least** we should offer the Lord is being faithful in hearing His Word and praising His name. What He desires to see is a **life** of repentance. That is a life that not only shuns sin, but then also lives to the praise and glory of Jesus with kindness and love to our neighbor, and faithfulness to our Lord, serving Him in His vineyard as He grants us the opportunity. May we be led to respond to the Lord's call with the obedience of faith!

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.