

Sermon Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Some scripture is open to misinterpretation, and once a Sunday school teacher asked a young class of children, “What do you think a land flowing with milk and honey would be like?” A hesitant little boy raised his hand, and he said, “Sticky?”

Some parables are difficult, but not this one, not this short, little parable. As always, there was a conflict, and the powers that be were there in the temple, and were questioning and trying to trap Jesus. They were saying, “What authority do you have? Where did you go to school? What are your references?” They asked questions, not to learn, but to trap Jesus. True learning requires openness to change and the possibility of repentance, and the powers that be in the temple were arguing with every fiber of their being to stay the same, and so do we. It went like this, “Jesus, we don’t like what you’re saying, but we’re having a hard time disagreeing with the truth of it so we’re going to attack you personally, and if we can’t disagree with you nor find any fault personally then we’ll attack your credentials.” It happens all the time.

The old commentator Barclay boiled this parable down to, “Fine words can never substitute for fine deeds.” So what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first, and he said, “Son, go work today in my vineyard,” and the first boy said, “I will not!” Afterwards, he thought about it, and he regretted that, and he did go, and he did as his father said. He then came to the second son, and he said, “Son, go and work in my vineyard today,” and the second son was a whole lot like that character, Eddie Haskell, on “Leave It To Beaver.” Do you remember that? Some of you are old enough. Most of you are old enough to remember. I’ve seen it in reruns. Eddie Haskell, I think I have his name right. He was always so polite in public. He said, “Good morning, Mrs. Cleaver, your hair is very pretty today,” or “This is the finest meal I have ever eaten.” Later, in private, he was a sneak. This son said, “Of course, Father, nothing would please me more than to go out and work in the field for you.” Two hours later, the verbally obedient son is lying on the sofa and watching MTV. In the scripture, son two said, “I go, sir,” and that word “sir” is the same word that is translated “Lord.” It reminds me of another of Jesus’ teachings, “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in Heaven.” Not saying, but doing.

Saying the words is not hard. There is no fear and trembling. There is no doubt to overcome. There are no allegiances to realign. There is no sacrificial giving in verbal faith. You just say it, then you go about your business without another thought about God or God’s will. The journey of faith is a journey with God, often pitting our will against God’s, often pitting the things we trust, against trust in God, and it is a journey I believe possible only with God’s help. To even desire the lifelong journey of faith, we must be in love with God. Saying that we want to do God’s will or saying that we love God, but doing nothing different is meaningless. If in our lives in God’s field, God’s field, which in the language of Matthew is the world, if we do nothing either loving towards God or toward God’s church or loving toward other people, if we merely say we love God, it is worse than meaningless. It is inviting Jesus’ question, “Why do you even bother to call me

Lord if you're not going to do what I say?" The religious officials, who invited this parable, were seen as the best people in the land, yet Jesus said tax collectors and prostitutes were going into the Kingdom ahead of them. These officials had used their religion to insulate themselves against God. They clung to traditions. They clung to rules. They clung to their own power. They had no need for God. They had selfish reasons to resist change because they had it good. The folks at the bottom, thought of as the dregs of the culture, had nothing except God. True, they had said no to God sometime in the past, and they had lived out a big capital NO to some of God's boundaries, but if they said Yes now, it was not too late from them. They, at least, knew that they needed more. God wants our hearts. Jesus wants us to want and love God with our whole hearts and our whole minds and our souls and to want to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Jesus did not teach blind obedience. He never taught begrudging, joy-stealing obedience. In this light, listen to Jesus where he says, "Where your heart is, where your desire is, where the things that you want and your inner self are, where your heart is, that is where your treasure is." Jesus wants us to want to be in relationship with God. Our treasure is our relationship with God, and that relationship changes us. How could it not? Think about the heart. The inner desire of son number one. He said no, but then he repented, he did some soul searching, he did some thinking, and then he decided that what he really wanted to do was what the father wanted him to do, and so he went and did that. His father's will because it was his heart's desire. Not out of blind obedience. An element of trust is always there, to be sure, because we do not always understand why it must be done now or why it must be done by me, but finally, it was his decision to repent, or turn from his "No" and turn it into a "Yes." He turned it into a "Yes" in his heart then he turned it into a "Yes" in his life by doing what his father asked him to do.

In John 14, Jesus appeals directly to people's love for God as motivation. He says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." In other words, loving God equals wanting to do and doing God's will. How big is this theme? It is throughout the Scripture. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." "Where your treasure is there your heart will be also." "And so my Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." And always, Matthew 22:37, "You shall love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and out of a believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

Forgive from the heart. Live from out of what is in your heart. Give money not with regret, but freely from the heart. Faith is not about grudging obedience. It is from the heart, and if your heart is not thus inclined, then it is time to pray for a change of heart. The journey of faith then begins in earnest.

A story is told of the Duke of Wellington when he won the battle of Waterloo. The French generals were brought to the Duke's tent for formal surrender, and it is said that the French began to flatter and to praise Wellington. They said, "Oh, we're not ashamed to be defeated by such a great warrior!" The Duke listened for a while, and he said simply, "Gentlemen, your swords."

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Jesus is not so much impressed by our praises. Jesus simply says, “Ladies and gentlemen, your hearts, your lives.” No matter how large or small our power, we fear complete surrender. We fear in a worldly way that we will have less if we give our all to God. Wesley recognized that in his covenant renewal prayer in which he wrote, “Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands. Put me to doing or put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you. Let me be full or let me be empty. Let me have all things or let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal.” I have seen hard hearts cry when they said and meant that prayer.

Do you trust God when it might cost you some personal power or freedom or time or money or talent? That is the question of faith, isn't it? We try to reduce it to mere verbal, “Yes sir,” but that won't do. Faith is a lifelong struggle. It is a dance with God, a dance with God, but before you join the dance with God, be clear, God leads. God leads.

Last week, you may have noticed some digging in our parking lot, and it may have alarmed you, but that's a good thing. Our alert building superintendent, Bill White, found that we didn't have enough slope on our sewer pipe away from the new building, and folks, you really want slope away from a building on your sewer pipe! I'm going to tell this story on Bill White. A construction crew was laying a drainpipe, and while digging, the workers uncovered a power cable in their way, and they stopped. They called in an electrician. The electrician came, and he looked at the cable, and he said, “Bill, that cable is dead. Go ahead, cut it out of the way.” Bill asked, “Are you sure there's no danger?” The electrician said, “Absolutely!” So Bill said, “Well, then, would you mind cutting it?” The electrician halted a minute, and said, “Well, well, I'm not that sure!” We say we surrender our hearts and lives to God with complete love and devotion and trust, and then we hold back. We say yes, I'll go and do, and then we fearful, busy, selfish, other gods, other desires, we say yes, and then we do nothing. Faith has personal cost.

A young pastor gave out a survey asking, “Do you think there should be a Sunday evening Bible study?” The young pastor was overwhelmed at the response. In this small church, over 75 people said, “Yes, there should be an evening Bible study.” Wow! That boy began making plans. He began ordering materials. Then an older, retired pastor, someone like Jim Medley, came around and suggested, “Now, slow down. Maybe you didn't ask the right question. Before you order all that material, how about asking it this way. Send out another survey, and ask, “Would you attend a Sunday night Bible study?” Well, there were 75 who said yes in general there ought to be a Sunday night Bible study, but on the second survey, only 12, who said they would attend. There is a difference between saying and doing.

A young woman recently told me about a friend of hers at college, who had taken a pledge to remain chaste until she was married. Parents, if you're asked later, you explain it. She signed this statement, and they had a ceremony, and she wore a bracelet of some kind. The friend who told me the story said the young woman still wore the bracelet, and she still thought it was a good idea, and something she should promote in general, but personally,

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she had broken her promise on a regular basis starting from the week after she had signed on the dotted line.

We have choices to make daily. Remember Jesus spoke plainly of two roads, the wide and the narrow, and there is no doubt about which road God wants us to choose, but a choice must be made. God wants us to choose the narrow road, the narrow gate, which leads to the Kingdom of God, but some do and some don't. There are choices to make. God does not want yes men or yes women nor blind obedience. God wants us to want to love Him with our whole hearts, our whole minds, and our souls and to want to love our neighbors as ourselves. God wants relationship that's real. That will take God's help. That will take God's Holy Spirit. That will take time, a lifetime of surrender. Jesus did not call God "King" demanding obedience. He called God "Father" who wants to give love and wants us to return from our harmful and hurtful and hateful wanderings. The kind of father Jesus painted was a waiting father at the end of the road, gazing, watching, and waiting for the prodigal son to come home, to desire to be a son again.

After preaching once on Jesus' command to forgive enemies, one lady said to me, "Preacher, you can make the Bible say anything." She didn't want to do that. Scripture can be twisted, there is no doubt about it, but folks, I hear Jesus saying clearly, you can say anything you want about faith, but if you love God, and if you trust God, it shows. It shows. If you act in a hateful, unloving way to yourself or to your neighbors or do absolutely nothing that God commanded, then does it really matter what you say in public? If you believe that God exists and you believe that love matters, you must believe that what you do matters. This two sons story is a story about saying one thing, and doing another, or rather, it's really about saying No to God, and then having the freedom to change your heart, to change your mind, to change your direction, to change your life to a Yes to God. All the way to the cross, Jesus lived this same example of doing God's will and wanting to do the will of God. Is that easy? No! No!

My daughter, Christina, is in love with Shakespeare. She is an English major at Presbyterian College. She did not go to a Methodist college because it was foreordained before all time that she go to a Presbyterian college. My daughter, Christina, is in love with Shakespeare. I want to close with this thought. A professor once told a class that reading Shakespeare's King Lear is an empty thing. She got the class' attention. She said you can read this play without ever encountering it. King Lear, the professor said, was not written to be read, it was written to be acted out or performed. To really encounter King Lear, you must witness its performance, likewise, the Christian faith. To twist Shakespeare, the world is, indeed, a stage, and as Christians, we are called to act out from the heart, not memorized lines and words, but to live on the stage of this world, our faith. Often fitfully improvising as we go, but looking to God for guidance and words and what to do next. That's what Jesus calls us to do today and every day, and thank God, this parable says to me, it gives us the freedom, God does, to at times say no, then reconsider, repent, and go and do, turning again and again to God our Father, amen, and thank God for the freedom and the grace to return. Amen.