

September 21, 2008
Pentecost 19

"A Lesson on Repentance from the Story of Two Sons"

MATTHEW 21:28-32

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' ²⁹ *"I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.* ³⁰ *"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.* ³¹ *"Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.* ³² *For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.*

A father was facing his last days of life on this earth with his two sons at his side. He turned to the oldest son John and said, "John, I know you have not been going to church and not reading your Bible. It won't be long before I die and go to be with Jesus. Will you promise to start reading your Bible and going to worship again after I die?" John looked at his father with anger in his eyes and said, "Dad, you never stop preaching at me, do you?" The father's face became sad and tears well up in his eyes.

Then the father turned to his younger son Dan. "Dan, I know you have not been going to church and reading your Bible. It won't be long before I die and to heaven to be with Jesus. Will you promise to start reading your Bible and going to worship after I die? Dan, looked at his Dad and smiled and said, "Sure, Dad, I promise you with all my heart." The dad smiled.

Well, Dad passed away. Something happened to John. He remembered the tears in his dad's eyes, and he started reading the Bible again the way he did when he was younger. He started going to church and never missed a Sunday as he was drawn close to the Savior he once cherished and loved.

Dan never did keep his promise to his dying father. He had good intentions, but never opened his Bible to start reading, and never made it to worship, and soon forgot the promise made to his father. It has been said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Jesus told us this story about two sons when was close to the shameful death on the cross. The one son said "No" but then changed his mine and did the work his father asked of him. The other son said "Yes" but then did not go into the vineyard to do the work his father asked of him. Jesus used this story or parable about the kingdom of God to illustrate how repentance works in the lives of people. Some say "No" at first, but then listen to what the Lord tells them about being saved through Jesus. Others say "Yes" at first and even show interest, but with the passing of time they resist and say "No" to the life saving message of the gospel.

One son said "no" and changed his mind to "yes"

There is no doubt as to how the one son feels about his father's request to go and work in the vineyard. He is brutally honest with his dad as he says, "I will not." Children can be very ungrateful to their parents. Parents provide them with tasty food, nice clothing, a cozy home in which to live, and lots of extras. Children should be happy to do chores around the house including cleaning their room, helping with the dishes, or mowing the lawn. How often don't parents hear children say these same words today, "I will not!" and "I don't want to" or "It is not my turn!"

Something similar happened with the people that Jesus talked to every day. He told them how he was the Good Shepherd who would die for the sheep, and how he was the Son of God. He talked to them about his heavenly Father's plan to rescue them with such simple words as "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." He talked to people and they said, "We don't want what you are telling us. We don't want to change our ways. We hate what you have to offer us." He once said of the people of Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings and you would not!"

Years ago, a farmer in the Great Plains watched in horror as prairie fire swept across his farm and destroyed his crops. His house and buildings were spared, but the crops were lost. As he walked across the blackened field, he noticed one of the chickens lying on the ground, dead with its feathers scorched. He kicked the dead bird, and out from under it ran several chicks that had been spared from the fire by the mother hen who gave her life for her little ones who would never be able to escape the fire. That is what Jesus wanted for the people in Jerusalem, but they would not come.

Then something happened to that first son who said "No" at first. Maybe he thought about how mean he was to his father and changed his mind and said to himself, "Yes, I am going to work for my dad in the vineyard." Something similar happened to the tax collectors and prostitutes. These egregious sinners said "No" at first, but as the love of Jesus changed their hearts they gladly were led by the Holy Spirit into the kingdom of God. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." Remember the lost or prodigal son who went off to a far country and squandered his inheritance in wild living. It says, "When he came to his senses, he said, 'I will set out and back to my father and say to him: Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worth to be called you son.'" Jesus was always reaching out to people, working with them, teaching them and telling them stories to lead them to repentance, away from trusting in themselves for their salvation, and trusting entirely in him.

What is repentance? Literally the word means that we change our minds or even our hearts. Our natural reaction to God's warning about sin and its consequences is to laugh and ridicule God or his messengers as the people did at the time of Noah before the great world flood. 1 Corinthians 2 says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them." When Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, he made fun of Jesus by saying, "You mean I need to go back up into my mother's womb and be born again." People walked away from Jesus when he warned them about loving riches more than the

Lord. People walked away from him and hated him when he proclaimed he was the Son of God. Even the immoral women and tax collectors hated Jesus at first, but then their hearts were changed by the words Jesus spoke to them and the love he showed to them. They were led by God's grace to say "Yes" to the blessings of the kingdom of God, this tremendous undeserved love that Jesus had for them.

Let me illustrate what repentance is with a story about an amazing rescue from a burning building in Detroit. About 15 years ago there was a fire in an old apartment complex in downtown Detroit. The people were trapped in their rooms. Because the alley was too narrow for the hook and ladder, the firemen had to set up a large inflatable air cushion that people jumped into to be saved from the flames. All jumped except for a 15 year old girl who was afraid to jump because she was blind. She did not trust the voices of the people calling out to here to jump straight down and she would be safe. But then her father came running home from work. He called out to his daughter to jump. At first she refused but then she listened to the voice of her father. I have known people who said "No" to what God offers them here in his word but then their hearts were changed. Maybe you know of someone who stubbornly refused to listen God's Word, but then the voice of the heavenly Father reached into their hearts, changed them and led them to say yes to what our Father offers us in Jesus his Son.

The other son said "yes" and changed his answer to "no"

Let's turn our attention to the other son who seems to be so eager to please his father. "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will sir,'" but he did not go. He sounded so very sincere as he says, "I will sir!" almost like some in the military who responds to the commanding officer. Did he have good intentions at first and then change his mind, or did he just put on a show? Jesus asked the nasty, nitpicking, religious people who were needling him with questions, "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" The answer was obvious. It was the son who changed his mind after saying no, and not the son who said yes and changed his mind to no.

Jesus experienced this over and over again in his ministry. People came to him in large numbers, interested in what he had to say, and interested in seeing his miracles, and interested in his potential to build a kingdom of glory on this earth. They listened, even nodded their heads, but when he talked about things that really mattered such as entering the kingdom of God and being spared from eternal destruction, they walked away in large numbers. In the next chapter Jesus will say of these religious people, "These people draw near to me with their lips and honor me with their mouths but their hearts are far from me." The same was true with John the Baptist. Jesus said of John, "For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him." People were willing to listen to John until he pointed them to Jesus as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. They listened for awhile and they walked away. Even when tax collectors and prostitutes listened to John's message and found peace and comfort in Jesus their Lamb of God, the others did not repent and believe.

"Come to church with me." "Sure, I'd be glad to come with you sometime, but not tomorrow, I need to mow my yard." "Haven't seen you in worship recently," said a pastor to one of the members of his flock. "Yea, I know I should be going more often." But nothing ever happens. It is easy to see this problem in other people but not in ourselves. Look at good

intentions we have for spending more time in the Word and more time in prayer, and getting more involved in witnessing to our faith. We have good intentions, we even say "yes" but then we go off and forget what we planned to do. Today, this morning, right now the same Lord Jesus who walked the temple court and pleaded with people to come to him, also invites us to hear him cry out from the cross, "It is finished." He invites us to look again at the nail marks in his hands as evidence that even the many "yeses" that turn into "later" or eventually "no's" have been forgiven. He invites us to come and physically receive his body and blood in the Holy Sacrament.

*Today your mercy calls us To wash away our sin.
However great our trespass, Whatever we have been,
However long from mercy Our hearts have turned away,
Your precious blood can wash us And make us clean today.*