

October 23, 2011
Pentecost 19

"Jesus' Story of Two Sons and Genuine Repentance"

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, "Truly I tell you, 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.

Think back to a time in your life when your parents asked you to do something. Your mom or dad told you to clean up your room, or help with the dishes or take out the trash, and you said, "I am tired" or "It is not my turn" or "I don't feel like doing that." But then you thought about it again. You changed your mind and decided to do it anyway. Or your parents asked you to clean up your room and you promised to do it by the end of the day. The next day came and room was still not cleaned.

Jesus tells us about a father who asked his sons to work for him in the vineyard. One of the boys flat out told his dad, "No, I don't want to work today," but then changed his mind and worked anyway. The other boy told his dad, "Sure I will go", but then never went out to work for his dad.

Of course, this story of Jesus has a higher meaning and application for our lives. You can think of times when God's Word challenged you to take a certain direction or change. You resisted at first. But then God's Word changed you and led you to go along with what the Lord wanted you to do. You have also experienced low times when you listened to what God's Word said, but then never carried through with what you said you would do.

Which son do you want to be? Do you want to be the son who says "No" and then changes his answer to "yes?" Or do you want to be the son who says "Yes" and changes his answer to "No?" Really when you think about it we don't want to be either. We want God's Word to lead us to say "yes" at first and then continue to say "yes" again and again. This is what we call genuine repentance. Genuine repentance is saying "yes" to God's Word at first and then saying "yes" to God's Word again and again. The Lord is the one who works this genuine repentance in your life and mine.

The son who said "no" and then said "yes"

Let's listen again to what Jesus says. "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.'" Jesus is not speaking these words to his disciples. He is speaking these words to the religious

leaders in Jerusalem who are gathering around him to criticize his teaching just a few days before he gave up his life for us in the cross. He cares enough to tell them a story that will change their lives if they listen to him. That's the love Jesus had for his enemies. Jesus never rejoiced over the death of his enemies. This past week we heard about the brutal death of the former dictator of Libya. Rebel forces pulled him from a storm drain, then beat him and put him to death. There was dancing in the streets. People in Libya are so happy Moammar Gadhafi is dead.

Jesus wanted his worst enemies to come into his kingdom. As Roman soldiers nailed him to the cross he prayed, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." These words of Jesus were so powerful that they led a man who made fun of Jesus to repent and pray, "Jesus, remember when you come into your kingdom." Jesus told this story of the two sons to his worst enemies to lead them to repentance and bring them into his kingdom. Jesus said his reason for coming to this earth was to seek and save that which was lost, and that includes all of us. He once said of the city of Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings and you would not!"

The son who said "no" changed his mind and said "yes." At first he says "I will not!" These are strong words. They are words of defiance and resistance. It is amazing how quickly little children learn the word "no" and they say it with such defiance and conviction. We hear that son say, "I will not" and we think of the natural resistance there is in all of us to the salvation that our God offers us in Jesus his Son. Romans 8 says: "The natural man is hostile to God." I was born into this world saying "no" to forgiveness and eternal life my heavenly Father had planned for me in Jesus his Son.

Have you ever said "no" to a solicitor? The phone rings. Your meal is interrupted. The voice on the other end of the phone offers you some special deal on a credit card. You tell them: "No, I am not interested." They persist and you tell them again, "No, I am not interested." Then you hang up the phone. You hang up the phone because the person on the other end has nothing to offer you. The natural human heart says God's word has nothing to offer me. It hates the true God who offers the gift of his Son. The natural human heart is very happy with its false gods and false hopes and natural religion. In his book, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah describes an interview with a very religious woman named Sheila. She said, "I believe in God. I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It is 'Sheilaism.' Just my own little voice." Get out of my life, I have my own god, just my own little voice.

The son who said no changed his mind. It says, "But later he changed his mind and went." Perhaps he was feeling guilty, or maybe he remembered how much his father meant to him. You felt bad when you told your mom, "It is not my turn to help with the dishes" but then changed your mind.

What changes people and leads them to put their trust in Jesus for their salvation? Jesus points to the example of the tax collectors and prostitutes. "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes did." These people resisted Jesus at first, but then turned to the love and forgiveness he had for them.

I have known people who have resisted hearing about Jesus but then changed their minds and so have you. You were once one of these people and so was I. But then God's Word came into our lives and changed us. God's Word opened our eyes to see how totally impossible it is to save ourselves from our sin and escape the judgment that is to come. God's Word led us to say with King David, "Have mercy on me O God according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."

Remember the story of the lost son who came to his senses and said, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Your heavenly Father has called you, spoken to you, and opened your heart and mind to believe in the gift of his Son Jesus.

Several years ago, there was a fire in one of the old apartment buildings in downtown Detroit. The people were trapped in one of the upper floors and there was no way the fire men could get up the stairs or get the ladders close enough to the burning building. So they set up one of these air filled bags and people were able to jump safely from several stories up in the building, all except for one 15 year old girl who refused to jump. You see, she was afraid to jump because she was blind. She could not see the how safe it was to jump and land in the large air-filled pillow. She did not trust the voices calling out to her to jump. But then her father came running home from work. He called out to her to jump out the window and she would be safe. The voice of your heavenly Father has called to you and led you to trust in Jesus for your salvation. He has changed you from saying "no" to saying "yes" to his love for you.

The son who said yes and then said no

But now Jesus draws our attention to the other son who said "yes" at first but then said "no." "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will sir,' but he did not go." He sounds so sincere at first at first as he says to his dad, "I will sir." He appears on the surface to be the model son, so eager and so willing to do what his father is asking him to do. But then he changes his mind and refuses to work in the vineyard. One wonders what changed his mind from yes to no. Did he get too busy? Did he forget? Or was he merely pretending all along and never intending to go out and work for his dead?

Let's keep in mind the people to whom Jesus is speaking. He was talking to people who were always eager to say yes to things that were religious, especially when it came to the fine points of keeping some man-made rule and regulation by which to make themselves acceptable to God. In the next chapter, Jesus will say to 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." They pretended to be interested in what Jesus had to offer as long as it involved nitpicky rules and regulations. When Jesus spoke about himself as the Son of God, or the Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, or the only hope of being saved, they rejected him and even planned how they might put him to death. These religious people would say "yes, yes, yes," to a teacher like John the Baptist if he would stroke their egos and make them feeling good about earning heaven with their own righteousness. How quickly they said "no, no, no" to John when he pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "For John came to you to show you the way

of righteousness, and you did not believe in him but the tax collectors and prostitutes did."

This morning Jesus asks us the all important question, "What do you think?" What do you think about the son who said "no" and then said, "yes?" What do you think about the son who said "yes" and then said "no?" I know what I want for my life, and I know what you want for your life. You want everything in your life to be yes in Jesus. You praise the Holy Spirit for leading you to say yes to the blessings you have in Jesus. You trust the Holy Spirit to lead you to say yes to every opportunity to live for him. This is the amazing, genuine repentance the Lord is working in your life and mine. To him be the praise and the glory. Amen.