

## Matthew 21:28-32

<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, ‘I will go, sir,’ but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said to him, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not change your mind and believe him.”

## The Third Son

### I.

Time to do your chores! Where I grew up, the farm kids had more to do for chores than the town kids. There were eggs to be gathered, manure to be shoveled, pigs to be fed, and whatever else needed to be done around the farm. Town kids like I was had it easy. Take out the garbage, mow the lawn, clean up a little around the house or yard, and whatever else my parents could think of for my sister and me to do.

It’s not too much to ask, is it, for a child to help out in the family business. It’s perfect—the family saves a little money not having to hire someone to do the work. The kids enjoy all the comforts and conveniences of their parents’ home, and even have a stake in the family business.

“‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, ‘I will not’” (Matthew 21:28-29, EHV). The first son’s answer just drips with exasperation as he shouts out: “no way! I’ve had it with this!” There is a total lack of respect in his belligerent attitude.

Maybe you can relate to this first son. It just seems that your parents asked you to do too many things to “help out.” Do your parents ever realize what’s going on in your life? Do they know all the stresses you are under? Even after you have moved out and are on your own, they still call and ask you to take care of something for them. It’s easy to grow tired of all this. Perhaps you can relate to the first son who reacted with such venom.

“‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went” (Matthew 21:29, EHV). After a little reflection, there is an attitude adjustment. When you think about your parents’ request for a little help around the place, or some assistance in the family business, it wasn’t so unreasonable after all. Without further complaint, you go and take care of what needed to be done.

“Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not change your mind and believe him” (Matthew 21:31-32, EHV).

With these words Jesus identifies the first son in the parable as the tax collectors and the prostitutes. It comes as no surprise that neither group was well regarded in society. Tax collectors were the most notorious cheats of the day, and prostitutes—as in pretty much every day and age—were known for their low moral character. Jesus identifies the dregs of society as people of higher moral character than the religious leaders to whom he was speaking.

### II.

“He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, ‘I will go, sir,’ but he did not go” (Matthew 21:30, EHV). The reply of the second son stands in stark contrast to the first. Whereas son number one had barked out an angry “no!” to his father’s request for help, son number two gives an answer filled with the utmost respect.

I wonder what reason he might have had for his dripping-with-honey reply to his father. Maybe son 2 didn’t do well with confrontation. The easiest thing was to say whatever his father wanted to hear and then go off to be by himself for a while. “Dad will forget about this soon enough and won’t bother me with it any more.”

You know what it is to have good intentions. Maybe son 2 had every plan to do exactly what his father had asked of him, but for whatever reason he just “didn’t get around to it.” Maybe he even forgot. I’ll bet you have had good intentions to get something done, but have failed to do it. Maybe he was just lazy and kept putting it off until the job was already done and he didn’t have to participate.

Back to Jesus’ explanation of his parable: “Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not change your mind and believe him” (Matthew 21:31-32, EHV).

The dregs of society were the “good son” in the end, while the religious leaders were the “bad son.” At the very least, the second son hadn’t repented of his failure to carry out his father’s will yet.

Every day we change our minds about things, don’t we? A student, nervous about an upcoming test, takes a pen and marks a few answers on the palm of her hand. Then, recognizing that this isn’t really the way to go, washes away the ink before the test and does the right thing. Every day we make decisions about how we are going to act—how faithful we are going to be in our lives as Christians.

Do you think Jesus would identify the dregs of our society as more noble in their Christian character than the people who show up for church? Which son do you think many Christians today would be identified with? Do we answer our Lord eagerly when he calls? Do we use the words of Isaiah: “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8, NIV84), but then sit down and relax and enjoy the football game and never think about our Lord and Savior until the following Sunday?

Lots of Christians seem to have good intentions, but do we fail to act? We say all the right things, but then sit on our hands while the world literally goes to hell without knowing the Lord Jesus all around us. Do we fail to go into the vineyard of the Kingdom of our Lord, even though we have good intentions to do so?

### III.

You may have noticed the title slide for today: The Third Son. Undoubtedly you can count really well. As you look through today’s reading, you find only *two* sons, not three.

The One telling the story of the two sons is the Son of his Heavenly Father. Way back—even before time began—the Father knew the actions of his Son would be necessary to save the world. “Son, I have a chore for you...”

Even before Adam and Eve stood in front of the snake holding that piece of fruit with bite-marks in it, God knew that a plan of action would be needed to save the Crown of his creation—mankind. When God announced the Savior and told Satan the Savior would someday crush his head, do you think Jesus was contemplating the severity of his chore?

As he knelt in another garden millennia later—the Garden of Gethsemane—sweat pouring off of him “like great drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44, EHV), do you think he was having second thoughts about his major role in the Father’s plan? Nope. He had just prayed: “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42, EHV).

No rogue Son was our Lord Jesus! In fact, in today’s Second Lesson, the Apostle Paul spoke of the kind of obedience Jesus showed to the Heavenly Father, and the kind of willingness he had to carry out his Father’s plan and will: “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8, EHV).

Jesus himself is far different than either of the characters in his parable. He completely and willingly carried out his Father’s wishes because he wanted *you* to be children of God.

#### IV.

In fact, that’s one of the striking things about this parable. The Greek word Jesus used is not the word for son, even though that’s the way English translations, even those striving to be gender-neutral, translate it. The Greek is the word for child. Perhaps the fear in English is that we would think he’s asking young children to go out and put in a full-day’s work in the vineyard, violating child-labor laws.

Jesus’ affectionate term for his own followers was “Children.” The Old Testament people of Israel were known as the Children of Israel, and converts to Christianity would be known as Children of God. That’s how we are still identified today.

Even when Jesus rebuked his listeners he said: “Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matthew 21:31, EHV). The phrase “ahead of you” is important. Jesus did not say that the religious leaders who were unrepentant at this moment had no chance of ever getting to heaven. They were being encouraged to change their minds yet again and *do* what they had initially eagerly expressed a desire to do—work for the Lord.

Of the sons in the parable, which ought we to strive to emulate? Neither. Strive to be like the third Son. Jesus is—obviously—the perfect example of a Christian life. He not only expressed a willingness to do his Father’s will, but went out and completed it.

No matter how hard we try to be like the Third Son, Jesus, we will always find ourselves failing—changing our minds, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad. But we are never alone. Our Lord Jesus was obedient to his Father’s will, even to death on the cross, so that we would never be abandoned. Look to him for strength. Refresh yourself in the heavenly meal of his body, given for you, and his blood, poured out for you. *Daily* refresh yourself by remembering your baptism, and drawing strength to go out into the Father’s vineyard to continue to do the work your Savior has entrusted you. Live your faith, don’t merely express it. Amen.