

Sermon for October 1, 2023 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21:28–32 (EHV)

Theme: “**Lord, help me be the child you want me to be.**”

- 1) A child who is willing to repent.
- 2) A child who does your will.

²⁸“*What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’* ²⁹*He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went.* ³⁰*He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, ‘I will 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, “*Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.* ³²*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.*”

So, what kind of child of God are you: the kind that tells Him, “No LORD, I not going to do what you command, “only later to repent and obey? Or are you the child who says, “I will,” only to neglect doing what you promised? Neither of these choices is “ideal,” are they?

For example, parents: would you be happy if your child acted like either of the two sons Jesus mentioned in our text? If not, how can God be pleased with us because, if we are honest with ourselves, we often act a little like both sons, don’t we? Shouldn’t that realization move us to repent and ask God to work a new willing spirit within us – one that not only gives lip service to God but also follows through with heartfelt gratitude by doing what the LORD wants in response to the great love he has shown us?

Therefore, with Jesus as our guide, let us learn to pray: “**Lord, help me be the child you want me to be.**” 1) A child who is willing to repent. 2) A child who does your will.

Part One: A child who is willing to repent.

What do you think? Jesus originally posed this question to some chief priests and elders of the people at the temple in Jerusalem who, out of sheer unbelief, challenged Jesus’ authority to teach. Because a person’s testimony regarding himself does not prove anything, Jesus asked them to consider John the Baptist’s ministry because he testified that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the world’s sins. However, these leaders did not want to think about John the Baptist. Why?

Because they didn't want to believe John's testimony about Jesus – even though it lined up with Scripture. Therefore, Jesus spoke a parable to the religious leaders: hoping to awaken them to the truth.

A man had two sons. The man represents God, and the two sons represent two classes of Jews who were both God's children according to his Old Testament covenant.

He went to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in my vineyard.' The father is not asking anything hard or unexpected of his son. He simply wants his son to show love by obeying his will. This represents God's call to his children to do his will out of love for him. And what exactly is the work God has planned for us? Earlier, Jesus himself said: *"This is the work of God: that you believe in the one he sent."*ⁱ

Faith exhibiting itself in obedient love - that is all that God has ever wanted from us. And knowing how weak we are - that we (because of our sinful nature) don't even have the power to desire salvation from him - God has sent His Holy Spirit with His Word to create the faith he desires in our hearts. Sadly, mankind still has the power to reject the Holy Spirit's work - as we see in the response of the first son, who told his father:

I will not.

Jesus tells us that this first son - with his obstinate and rebellious response - represents the tax collectors and prostitutes of his day: in other words, gross sinners who may have initially laughed off God's call to repent or simply disregarded it for a time - not wanting to give up their sins.

Sadly, we also have been rebellious like this first son, haven't we? We all have pet sins that we don't want to give up. When someone lovingly points them out - calling us to repent - our sinful thoughts defiantly cry out, "I will not." I will not stop living with my boy or girlfriend outside of marriage. I will not stop drinking as much alcohol as I do, even though it hurts people around me. I will not stop gossiping or teasing my coworker, who gets angry quickly. I will not try to come to church more often. I will not stop coveting the luxuries I desire, etc.... We deserve more than just a good grounding or spanking for such rebellion. We deserve God's everlasting punishment in hell.

But we read regarding this rebellious son that *later he changed his mind and went* and did his father's will.

This represents the tax collectors and prostitutes who - even though they had rejected calls to repentance in the past - were cut to the heart at John the Baptist's preaching. They believed his message, repented of their sins, and looked to the coming Messiah for forgiveness. As fruits of their repentance, they left their sins behind and pursued learning all they could about the coming

Messiah. They treasured the Gospel - demonstrated by their coming to hear John's preaching, kind actions towards each other, and desire to share the good news of Christ.

And God does the same for us, doesn't he? In love, the Holy Spirit continues to both call us to repentance and remind us of the forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross. Just as the Father's love led the first son to change his mind (that is, just as the Father's love led the tax collectors and prostitutes to repent), so the Father's same love for us leads us to repent of our sins and look to Jesus alone for forgiveness and salvation.

That is why we pray, "Lord, help me be the child you want me to be: a child willing to repent. I thank you for your patience, mercy, and love. By the power of your Spirit, lead me to always be in a state of repentance: turning from sin to you in love and faith. In the peace of your forgiveness, help me be a child who does your will."

Part Two: A child who does your will.

The father *came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, 'I will go, sir.'* This second son represents the chief priests and elders of Israel who, when they read about the coming Messiah in Scripture, promised that they would believe and obey the Messiah wholeheartedly.

Sadly, Jesus says that son *did not go* and do his father's will. This represents the fact that, even though Judah's religious elite promised to believe in the Messiah, they utterly rejected Jesus. They were unwilling to accept the testimony of John the Baptist when he called them to repent. They were unwilling to marvel and praise God for his work of bringing rebellious sinners like the tax collectors and prostitutes to faith. They were unwilling to let their heavenly Father's love move them to believe in His Son as they promised they would.

This is why Jesus tells them the scathing truth: *The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.* In other words, "The people you condemned as the worst sinners in the world, who you thought could never make it to heaven; they are better than you! They repented at John the Baptist's preaching and are therefore forgiven. You, however, have not repented. That is why you remain outside God's kingdom while they are coming in.

Thankfully, none of us are like these chief priests and Jewish leaders, right? Well, while it may be true that we don't outwardly reject Jesus as the Messiah as they did, don't we still act like the second son in that we promise to do things for God, only to renege on our promises?

Just think of the many confirmation students over the years who have stood before this altar promising to be faithful to Christ, even to the point of death, only to stop coming to worship and

Bible class. Are they not in danger of becoming the son who made the promise but did not fulfill his father's will?

But they aren't the only ones. We all need to look hard at ourselves and the promises we made in our hearts to God - only to have broken them. "Lord, I will help the person who needs help. Lord, I will come to church more regularly. Lord, I will stop lusting over that person or object. Lord, I will be content with what you give me, etc...." only to have not kept our promises. And I don't just mean accidentally messing up either; I mean, how many times haven't we willfully done the opposite of the good we said we would do? Sadly, too many times, right?

So where does that leave us? It should leave us at the foot of the cross, asking the LORD to forgive us. And when we turn to him in repentance and faith, he shows himself willing to forgive us. That is precisely what Jesus did with the chief priests and elders of the people. Notice that Jesus didn't close heaven to them but stated: "*Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you*". He did not say, "instead of you." His word choice was purposeful: it was meant to reveal their sin and invite them to repent so they could join the former tax collectors and prostitutes in being citizens of Christ's eternal kingdom.

The Lord holds the door open for us as well. Whenever we sin, he calls us to repent and trust in him: both for the forgiveness of our sins and for his help to be the children he wants us to be - children who do his will.

And how does the LORD help us do his will? He sends the Holy Spirit through His Word, who creates the desire in our hearts to do his will. This desire stems from the good news that Jesus (our almighty God) took on human flesh and blood to die for our sins. This message of Christ's selfless work for us changes our attitudes. It makes us thankful - wanting to live as the children God declared us to be in baptism. And, having created this desire in our hearts through faith in the Gospel, the Holy Spirit guides us with God's Word to avoid the evil God wants us to avoid and do the good He wants us to do - all in response to his saving grace.

While we will never be sinless on this evil earth due to the sinful nature that clings to us until the day we die, we will always be forgiven because of Jesus.ⁱⁱ May that truth move us to strive forward in our faith to be the children he wants us to be: Children who are always willing to repent and children who (in the peace of Christ's forgiveness) willingly obey His will. Amen.

ⁱ John 6:29, EHV

ⁱⁱ Cf. 1 John 2:1-2