

Text: Matthew 21:28-32

Title: Empty Talk Versus Real Repentance

Truth: Repentant sinners are saved, but not religious talkers.

Date/Location: July 27, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

The religious leaders would not say who authorized John's baptism—heaven or men. They feared people, did not fear God, and would not answer Jesus's question. John's call for repentance was clear, and at least some in their number knew they needed that repentance (Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, John 19:38-39). But these hard-hearted ones who were trying to trap Jesus in His words had no interest in repenting of anything. So, the Lord told a story to illustrate an important point.

I. The Story, v. 28-30

- A. This is a very straightforward story. A man goes to each of his two sons and tells them to go work in his vineyard. The assumption is that a father has authority to expect his sons to go and work as he told. For a son to disobey was out of step with the "obey your parents" and "honor your father and mother" instruction in the Law (Eph. 6:1-3, Exodus 20:12).
- B. The meat of the story comes in son's two different responses. **The first son** said that he would **not** go to do the work. He immediately rebelled against his dad and refused to do what he was told. That is sin. However, he evidently thought about it for a bit and regretted what he said and went to do the work in the vineyard. The word "regret" is not the same as the word for repent, but his action showed that he not only **felt** very sorry about the situation, but he **changed** his mind and changed his ways. *That* is repentance.
- C. **The second son** received his father's request kindly enough and affirmed that he **would** go and work. But in fact he did not go to the work. We would like to imagine that his conscience bothered him, but it may well not have. He may have lied and was not bothered by it.

II. The Application Question and Answer, v. 31a

- A. The Lord asks the embarrassingly obvious question: who did the will of his father?
- B. The answer is clear: the one who *did* the will of the father, not the one who merely said he would do it. Mere talk is meaningless. Notice also that a delay because of a bad attitude did not permanently disqualify the first brother. He was commended as the one who did the will of His father despite the initial disobedience.
- C. The religious leaders answered correctly—even they could not get this one wrong. What they ended up doing was condemning themselves, for they offered a lot of God-talk, but no God-action.

III. The Lesson, v. 31b-32

- A. Is the self-condemnation of the chief priests and elders evident to you? I take it that it goes like this: they *professed* to be followers of God, but when God called them through John the Baptist¹ to repent and obey His word, they did not. The Father spoke, and they ignored it. They did not believe John initially. And they did not—after God gave them more time—regret it and believe John’s message. I doubt their consciences were active enough to bother them on this count. They should have repented right there.
- B. On the other hand, the “tax collectors and sinners” (harlots in this case) earlier in their lives did not show proper respect for God but later believed John the Baptist and did repent. They enter the kingdom of God before the chief priests and elders! This is a shocker to the religious leaders. In their works-based mindset, they could conceive of no way on earth that a tax collector or prostitute would enter heaven before them.

But those sinners despised by the establishment followed John’s “way of righteousness”—righteousness imputed by God, by grace, through faith, demonstrated in repentance. Because of this, they had a righteousness which exceeded that of the scribes and

¹ And subsequently, Jesus.

Pharisees (Matthew 5:20) and entered the kingdom before them!
And so can we!

The “before you” phrase is not meant to suggest that the Pharisees will eventually “make it” at some later time. They will not make it at all unless they repent.

- C. The parable illustrates that believing the message of God is demonstrated by “going.” Unbelief is expressed by “not going.” Belief is required, of course, and real belief and respect for the authority speaking to you will induce you to move. In contrast, the professed religiosity of the Jewish leadership was meaningless. They drew near to God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him (Matt. 15:8, Isaiah 29:13).

Notice too that it is the end—the big picture outcome—not the potholes along the way, that decide whether the person obeyed or not.

- D. In the story the father exercised patience toward the first son. In real life, the Father exercises patience toward his children.² So, the parable also illustrates the great patience of God.
- E. God has an open call for people to obey Him. He publishes that call in the Word of God and in the human conscience. He shows some of Himself in the creation. He explains the rest in His Word through His people.

Conclusion

What a rich parable. The Lord used it to invite the religious leaders to think (v. 28). We should think as well. In just a few lines, we are brought into a very deep theological matter of talk versus walk, of profession versus possession, of no repentance versus real repentance, of the Father’s patience and of the way of righteousness.

MAP

² Children by creation, only some of whom are like the first son in the story—obedient and children by faith.